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Faith in Action for Social Justice

Should Christians Own Guns?

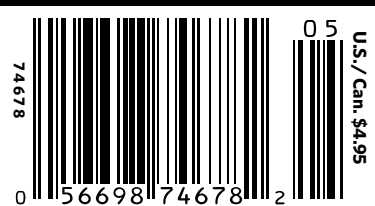
A conservative pastor decries the idolatry of gun culture.

PLUS:

Thirsting for democracy in Michigan

NatGeo's journey through the world of faith

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IT WASN'T THE kind of sermon you might expect from a conservative evangelical pastor who's a member of the National Rifle Association. "Who will ultimately save us?" asked Rev. Rob Schenck in a November 2015 sermon he delivered at Washington National Cathedral. "Jesus or something else? Christ or a Glock?"

Until recently, Schenck was best known as a lifelong anti-abortion activist, chair of the Evangelical Church Alliance, and president of Faith in Action, a nonpartisan missionary organization in D.C. that erected an 850-pound granite rendering of the 10 Commandments on its lawn, directly across from the U.S. Supreme Court. He ministers to some of the most conservative tea partiers on Capitol Hill. But Schenck's born-again faith also led him to question the "pro-gun enthusiasm" that thrives in

some conservative evangelical circles. Embedded in the debate is an old question for Christians: Is it ever biblically permissible to defend ourselves and our family against assailants? However you come down on this, violence and retaliation should always be viewed through the lens of tragedy and seen as a breach of the peace of Christ, not celebrated or glorified.

Schenck's growing unease with evangelical gun culture was documented in Abigail Disney's 2015 film, *The Armor of Light* (reviewed by Caroline Barnett in the February issue of *Sojourners*), a film that follows Schenck's transformative friendship with Lucia McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis, an unarmed black teenager who was



Rev. Rob Schenck

shot and killed by a white man in 2012. "We have replaced God with our guns as the protector," says McBath. In this issue's cover story, Schenck spells out his theological and biblical analysis of God and guns—an analysis that Schenck ultimately realizes has a lot to do with the words carved in granite right outside his office.

Complementing Schenck's theological inquiry is some practical advice from former Sojourners chief operating officer Charles Gutenson: How can we have meaningful and productive conversations with people who disagree with us about guns? The answer, Gutenson writes, isn't so much about arming yourself with discussion points; it's found in something that's often more difficult: listening. ■

Letters

She Is Wisdom

I want to say thank you to Natalie Wigg-Stevenson for the lyrical description of her experience of childbirth and the (uncertain) joy of having her baby girl baptized ("The Agony and Ecstasy of Baptism," March 2016). I share her concerns about misogynistic, patriarchal distortions of God's truth. For the past decade I have found it helpful and liberating to think of and always call the Holy Spirit "*she*." She is the "*sophia*" (feminine wisdom) of God and the one who breathes life into us all, first at birth and then at baptism. A Hebrew Testament example where wisdom is referred to as "*she*" is in Proverbs 3:13-18, a really beautiful passage.

Patricia Besseling Holgate
sojo.net comment

Openness of Hearts

After reading Eboo Patel's "The Gift of Small Things" (March 2016), I found myself weeping at the kitchen counter. The warmth and openness of hearts he described between the Muslim and Christian neighbors in Chicago made me realize how deeply I am wounded by the rhetoric of separation and fear that permeates our national dialogue. *Sojourners* gives me stories of hope

If God loves creation, then God loves every part of it.

and unity, which help me to keep the faith. Thank you.

Greg Wise
Dana Point, California

Care for the Fallen Sparrow

I fully agree with Rose Marie Berger that fear is at the root of gun violence in the United States ("Afraid and Reaching for a Gun," March 2016). I appreciate her willingness to "challenge the culture of violence and encourage a culture of life." However, I respectfully take exception to the idea that "in rural areas a gun can be a tool for wildlife management" or the implication that a legitimate use of a gun is "to shoot copperheads." If God loves creation, then God loves every part of it—that includes copperheads as well as the fallen sparrow. The living God creates and cares for all creatures. And God must weep when any of God's children are "managed" with a gun.

Bob Muth
Kalispell, Montana

Fruitful Lives

Your January 2016 issue is my favorite thus far, in which Ellen Painter Dollar takes an

unorthodox stance on fruitfulness. In her article "Redefining Fruitfulness," she challenges the church to accept childless couples as being more than the stereotypes suggest, by seeing the word "fruitful" beyond its reproductive meaning.

Jesus had no children, yet defined fruitfulness; clearly, our loins are not the only way we are called to produce fruit. Procreation and parenting are often God-honoring processes, which I believe put a smile on God's face, but in no way are they the only way to obey God. God has a different role for each and every one of us. In Ephesians 2:22, it talks of us as bricks in the grand temple of the Lord. Not every brick is going to be a baby-popping machine. Thank you, Ms. Dollar, for such a tolerant and progressive perspective, and may we all succeed in producing fruitful lives in our own godly way.

Sarah Eby
Farmington Hills, Michigan

Your name here! Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, *Sojourners*, 3333 14th St. NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20010. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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BY JIM WALLIS

Parenting for Racial Justice



WE ARE A baseball family, with our two boys playing on many teams over the years with multiracial teammates, coaches, and leadership in the organizations shaping those programs. I have long been a Little League baseball coach, and my wife, Joy, has been commissioner at every level too.

In baseball, talent and teamwork are the metrics and measuring sticks, not the race of one's teammates. For both of my boys, their teammates are their closest friends.

Being a Little League coach (for 11 years and 22 seasons!) has given me a place to reflect on our nation's racial issues. Playing baseball brings you closer together. My son Luke often says his high school teammates are the best friends he's ever had, and at every level of Little League, my players always testify in our final team meeting of the season how they have become such close friends. Being teammates really does help overcome

even to national events, which sometimes includes race. What becomes clear is that we all care more about our children and their future than anything else, and beginning to talk about our kids' futures *together* can be a very powerful moment.

EVERY BLACK PLAYER I ever coached has had what's called "the talk" with his or her dad or mom—a conversation on how to behave and not behave in the presence of a police officer. It's a talk designed to protect young black men and women from their local law enforcement officials. All black players have had that talk with their parents, whether their families are low-income or D.C. elite.

When I point out that *none* of my white players have had that talk, and that few of their parents even know about it, the faces of white parents around the room often look uncomfortable. Does it bother us as white parents that black parents have that talk with their kids when we don't? Have they talked to the black parents of their children's teammates about it? It's a great opportunity for white parents to hear from black parents about their hopes and fears for their children's lives. White parents can ask, "How did you feel when you had to tell your son he couldn't trust the law enforcement officials who are supposed to protect him?" White parents can ask themselves, "How would I feel if I had to have that 'talk' with my children?"

Joy and I recently have been visiting potential colleges with our son, and we have found that such visits can also be a revealing experience

about parenting for racial justice. Very few of the schools we visited easily volunteered information on their racial diversity. We had to ask. The few that actively told prospective students and their parents about the progress they were making on racial, cultural, and economic diversity in their student bodies were wonderful exceptions and quickly won our attention.

At many colleges, people instead talked about how their students were "winners," and it was apparent that success was defined in mostly monetary terms. Our own "student athlete" was committed to finding a top academic school, and it also mattered to him what the schools seemed to care most about. The schools that focused on the *values* being taught at their institutions—those that focused a lot on "service" and "social justice" (especially if they also had a great baseball program!)—won our hearts and minds and ultimately became the schools that most attracted our son.

Parenting for racial justice can make a great difference. What do we tell our children about race and racism? Who are our kids' classmates and teammates? With whom do they have play dates and sleepovers? Who is always in and around our own houses? Who crosses the thresholds of our lives? All these are crucial aspects of how young worldviews are formed.

Speaking and advocating are critical and vocational commitments in our lives, but Joy and I have come to see that parenting for justice and peace may be among the most important things that we will ever do. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

At many colleges we visited, it was apparent that "success" was defined in mostly monetary terms.

racial bias and prejudice, because it is the issue of proximity that finally helps human beings understand one another and learn empathy. On Little League teams we are all cheering for one another, looking out for one another, picking one another up when we fall down or make a mistake, and learning to be positive as we work together for our common goals.

One of the best things to watch over the course of a season is how, across racial lines, the parents of players become friends as well. It is especially interesting to see how the conversation topics develop over time, moving from "just baseball" to school and future, to work and family, to sharing of life experiences, and

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Caretakers of Our Common Home

Indigenous women attend a Mass celebrated by Pope Francis in February in Chiapas, Mexico. During his homily the pope acknowledged their “systematic and organized” marginalization. “Some have considered your values, culture, and traditions to be inferior,” he said. “Others, intoxicated by power, money, and market trends, have stolen your lands or contaminated them.” Francis praised Latin American Indigenous communities for their wisdom on how to interact harmoniously with nature. “Today’s world, ravaged as it is by a throwaway culture, needs you!” he said.

By David Cortright

Risky Business

Why U.S. airstrikes on another Arab country is a very bad idea.

ADD LIBYA TO the growing list of countries where the United States is conducting military operations in the name of fighting terrorism.

In February, a U.S. airstrike in the town of Sabratha in western Libya killed more than 40 people. The intended target was said to be Nouredine Chouchane, a senior commander of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) from nearby Tunisia, but there has been no independent confirmation that he was at the site. Among those killed in the attack were two Serbian embassy staff who were being held hostage by ISIS.

Since the overthrow of the Gadhafi regime in 2011, Libya has been engulfed by chaos. There are now two competing governments—one in the eastern city of Tobruk (recognized by the United Nations) and the other in Tripoli—neither with much power or public support. Real power in the country is in the hands of hundreds of militia groups that rule local areas and often support rival government factions. Many of the militias

oppose the presence of foreign forces, and the Tripoli-based government vigorously criticized the U.S. attack on Sabratha.

Pentagon commanders believe that bombing and commando operations can reduce the terrorist threat in Libya, but the

Military intervention in the region is the problem, not the solution.

experience of military intervention in other countries during the past 14 years suggests otherwise. U.S. military attacks have not brought stability and peace to Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, or Syria. Why do we think they will solve the problems now in Libya?

The United States fought a major war in Iraq to suppress al Qaeda, but that organization morphed into the even-more-dangerous menace of ISIS. The U.S. has conducted more than 10,000 military strikes against extremist targets in Syria and Iraq during the past

18 months, but the threat from ISIS in the region remains formidable and is now spreading to Libya.

Keep in mind that U.S. bombing strikes in 2011 created the chaos in Libya in the first place, causing the collapse of the state and spreading lawlessness and armed conflict across the region.

Military intervention in the region is the problem, not the solution. U.S. airstrikes reinforce the false narrative of the extremists that the West is “waging war on Islam.” Bombs falling on another Arab country will be a bonanza for ISIS recruiters.

Rather than further stoking the flames of chaos, the U.S. should focus instead on encouraging negotiations among Libya’s competing factions and help to build a system of local governance. The only hope for a resolution to the crisis is political agreement among the local parties. U.S. intervention could shatter the thin hopes of forging a

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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viable coalition government in Libya.

Now is an especially bad time for external military intervention. The Libyan factions have been engaged in U.N.-brokered political discussions in recent months. The parties took tentative steps toward forming a unity government in January, but the Tripoli faction rejected that plan. Additional negotiations and dialogue among the parties will be needed to forge a mutually acceptable compromise. Encouraging and supporting that political

By Daniel Mendoza

Solitary Torture

For 23 hours a day, I was kept in a windowless room smaller than a horse stable. How does this make us safer?

IN MY HUMAN development class recently, the instructor showed a documentary about a 13-year-old girl with the pseudonym Genie. Her parents kept her in isolation for most of her life, until a social worker discovered her. Genie was kept in a room, tied to a chair, with virtually no human contact. She was “uncivilized” and could barely walk or talk. While my classmates gasped in horror at the video, I found myself relating to her.

I had been incarcerated in a California juvenile hall for four-and-a-half years. Roughly two months of that time was spent in solitary confinement—the longest stretch was six weeks. Like Genie, I was isolated in a room for 23 to 24 hours a day.

My classmates thought that Genie’s parents were “monsters” and “horrible” people. I wondered how many of them knew that we live in a country where youth and adults are commonly put in similar conditions for months or even years.

Today about 100,000 people—including thousands of youth—are held in solitary confinement housing units in juvenile facilities and adult jails and prisons across the United States. Systems use solitary confinement, or isolation, to keep individuals safe from themselves or others and for punishment. Solitary confinement has been linked to depression, anti-social behavior, anxiety, psychological damage, and self-harm. We now understand that solitary confinement

process should be the top U.S. priority.

A stable government in Libya would be more than capable of containing the threat from ISIS and could contribute to greater security in the region. Let’s focus on that task rather than the risky business of widening our military involvement in the Middle East. ■

David Cortright, author of Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas, is director of policy studies at Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies in Indiana.

does not keep us safe and does more harm than good, especially to youth who are still developing, physically and mentally.

In January, President Obama banned the use of solitary confinement for youth at the federal level and adopted sweeping Department of Justice reforms to drastically reduce the use of solitary for adults in federal

Thousands of youth are held in solitary confinement in the U.S.

prisons, banning it for low-level infractions. This was a big step forward, even though it directly impacts only 10,000 federal prisoners, and fewer than 30 youth. The real impact is the message it sends to state and local systems, which hold the largest share of incarcerated people.

Many people who come out after experiencing isolation have trouble adapting back into society. When I was released, my social skills were nonexistent and my communication skills were very poor. Big crowds made me anxious. I was scared to go to school because I felt like I was under constant threat and I was afraid of how I would react. Sometimes I felt depressed. I spent the majority of my time in my room at home, because it was the only place I felt comfortable. I had become institutionalized.

However, I was lucky. I had a support system to keep me on track. But what about the

From the Archives

May 2004

Preferential Option for the Poor

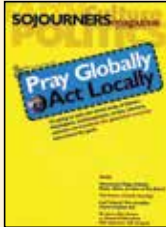
IN 1968, the [Latin American Catholic] bishops met in Medellín, Colombia, to examine the church's role in social and political transformation in Latin America. Here the vision of a "preferential option for the poor," which had been rising up from the base for several years, was first clarified.

"The Lord's distinct commandment to evangelize the poor," wrote the bishops at Medellín, "ought to bring us to a distribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors."

The Medellín documents dealt with economic justice and development, anti-violence and peace, families, shifting social demographics, and the wealth and poverty of the church. They called for a social order where a person is not treated as an object, but as an agent of his or her own history. At Puebla, in 1979, the Latin American bishops renewed their commitment. ...

"We must remember Puebla, when 25 years ago the bishops' conference of Latin American and the Catholic Church expressed the option for the poor," [President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela] said when he addressed the leaders of 34 democracies at the January 2004 Summit of the Americas in Monterrey, Mexico. "This past must guide our vision of the future. It must inform our discussions on economic growth with equality and justice for all." ■

Rose Marie Berger is on the Sojourners editorial staff.



youth or adults who don't receive the help or services they need? Is it a surprise that they find themselves struggling or in some cases back in jail? The juvenile justice system is supposed to rehabilitate youth, not make them worse by placing them in isolation—sometimes for reasons as minor as talking back to staff. And adult jails and prisons should be able to hold people accountable for crimes without torturing them. Incarcerated youth and adults need mental-health services, education, and opportunities to grow and change.

Genie never recovered from the isolation she experienced, and was never able to integrate into society. The same is true of many people who have experienced solitary confinement. Enough damage has been done to our incarcerated brothers and sisters. If it

doesn't stop now, when will it?

Even before President Obama's announcement, some states had begun reducing their use of solitary confinement, but it will take a strong movement of people who care about real justice to end this practice. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture is uniting faith communities against solitary confinement in prisons and has created a replica solitary cell to spread awareness. In April, several organizations formally launched a campaign called Stop Solitary for Kids. It's time to end this heinous practice. ■

Daniel Mendoza, a Youth Partnership consultant with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, attends Sierra Community College in California.

By Dianne D. Glave

The Green Confessions of Nat Turner

The rich and varied roots of black environmental liberation theology.

WHEN ONE THINKS of black environmental liberation theology, the name of slave-rebellion leader Nat Turner might not immediately spring to mind. Perhaps it should.

A biopic on the life of Turner, called *The Birth of a Nation*, is scheduled for release in October. Based on early reviews, I expect the film by director Nate Parker (*Red Tails*, *Arbitrage*) to deliver a powerful recounting of Turner's life.

In 1831, Turner led enslaved and free African Americans in a rebellion against slaveholders in Southampton County, Va. The uprising was swift, violent, and bloody. At least 200 African Americans and more than 50 whites died. After whites quelled the rebellion, Turner hid in the woods for several weeks. He was eventually captured and executed.

Turner's time alone in the woods offers surprising insights. He is an African-American man familiar with nature. He is a Christian preacher given to visions. From that arises a deep environmental wisdom.

The original report of the slave rebellion is found in *The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton VA*, as told by Turner to a

white lawyer in Richmond, Va. "The blood of Christ [that] had been shed on this earth, and had ascended to heaven for the salvation of sinners," Turner says in the book, "was now returning to earth again in the form of dew."

Turner's visions were based on his understanding of the Bible. He was literate (that in itself was unusual for one enslaved) and worshipped God. Turner was a prophet of God, in the context of nature and revolt.

In *The Confessions*, he says, "I then found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens. And now the Holy Ghost had revealed itself to me, and made plain the miracles it had shown me."

His theology—an analysis of scripture, faith, and practice—galvanized him to rebel against white slavers. He incited rebellion out of his faith in a Christian God. As an enslaved man, he fought for African Americans.

TURNER'S IDEAS AND experiences are part of the history of an eco-theology based

on black liberation theology. It is forged out of the history of environmental justice and activism rooted in Christian experience, worship, and theology by and of African Americans. This theology seeks transformed practices that shield African Americans from exposure to toxins, pollution, and the general effects of environmental racism.

In recent times, we have witnessed inspiring examples of faith-rooted resistance by people of African descent through black eco-theology. In 1977, Wangari Maathai organized the Green Belt Movement, which planted trees in Kenya in response to defor-

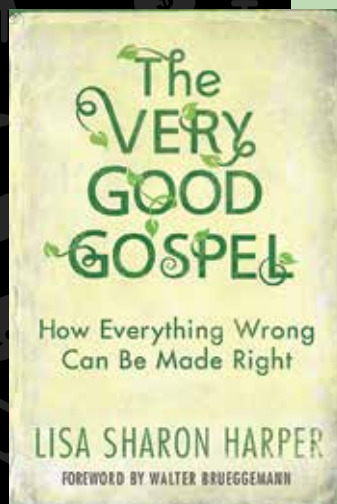
Turner's environmental vision was based on his understanding of the Bible.

estation and soil erosion. Maathai recounted how Western missionaries rushed to cut down trees, counter to the experience of Maathai's community, which saw the trees as sacred. Her great act of rebellion, as an African who embraced both her Christianity and African spirituality, was to fight for the trees to be replanted as a prayer to the earth through action.

Another example can be found in the work of Lennox Yearwood. On the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, in 2015, Yearwood, an African-American pastor and head of the Hip Hop Caucus, advocated for environmental equity for many African Americans in Louisiana who have not seen their neighborhoods, homes, and lives restored in the same way white people have. Among many other efforts, Yearwood has led marches against companies that profit from the damage done by fossil fuels to the environment.

Nat Turner, Wangari Maathai, and Lennox Yearwood are just a few of the many encouraging practitioners of ecological resistance, actions led by people of African descent and Christian faith that carry on the rich tradition of black environmental liberation theology. ■

Dianne D. Glave, author of Rooted in the Earth, is coordinator of diversity development for the Western Pennsylvania United Methodist Conference Center.



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The Very Good Gospel author
Lisa Sharon Harper

A THEOLOGY OF JUSTICE
INITIATIVE FROM

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Faith, Fear, and Courage

WHEN IT IS prayer time, Rami Nashashibi prays. His Muslim faith is the core of his life and work, inspiring the two decades of advocacy he has done on behalf of the poor and marginalized on the South Side of Chicago.

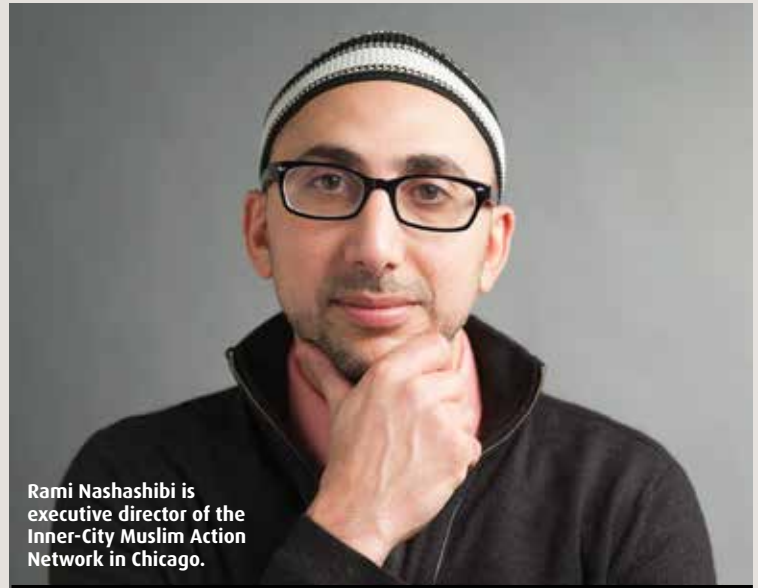
But when prayer time arrived on an unseasonably warm day in December, Nashashibi paused. It was just days after the terrible terrorist attack in San Bernardino, where extremists calling themselves Muslims murdered 14 people and injured many more. Nashashibi was in his neighborhood park with his three kids, and he found himself suddenly struck by fear at the thought of praying in public and therefore being openly identified as Muslim at a time when so many equated that term with terrorist.

That neighborhood park happened to be Marquette Park. Fifty years earlier another man of faith stood not far from where Nashashibi was standing, and he too felt fear.

We need faith-inspired courage to stand up to our enemies when they are strong and our friends when they are wrong.

That man was Martin Luther King Jr. He had come to Chicago in 1966 to raise awareness about discriminatory housing practices on the South Side. His march through Marquette Park was met with racist sneers and vigilante violence. A brick thrown his way actually hit him in the head and brought him to his knees.

Nashashibi had been studying this history closely. His organization, the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), is leading the effort to erect a statue of King in that area—which would be the first significant



Rami Nashashibi is executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network in Chicago.

Inner-City Muslim Action Network

memorial to King in Chicago.

In the same place, 50 years apart, two men of different faiths faced a similar question: Would their faith be the victim of fear or the source of courage? Thousands of fellow protesters were watching King. Three Muslim children were watching Nashashibi.

NASHASHIBI SHARED this story with President Obama on the historic occasion of the president's first official visit to an American mosque. It visibly moved Obama, to the point where he included the story in his address to the annual National Prayer Breakfast the next day.

If you read the whole speech, you'll see that Nashashibi's story fit into a larger theme that had been on the president's mind for some time: faith, fear, and courage. Calling fear a "primal" and "contagious" emotion, Obama confessed to feeling it himself frequently, but he continued, "if we let it consume us, the consequences of that fear can be worse than any outward threat."

We need faith-inspired

courage to stand up to our enemies when they are strong and our friends when they are wrong, Obama emphasized.

He went on to quote Nelson Mandela: "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it ... The brave [person] is not [the one] who does not feel afraid, but [the one] who conquers that fear."

Obama moved on to cite his own Christian faith, which he said gave him grace and courage in the face of very real threats and very palpable fear. On a daily basis he needed to, in the words of the Bible, "put on the full armor of God."

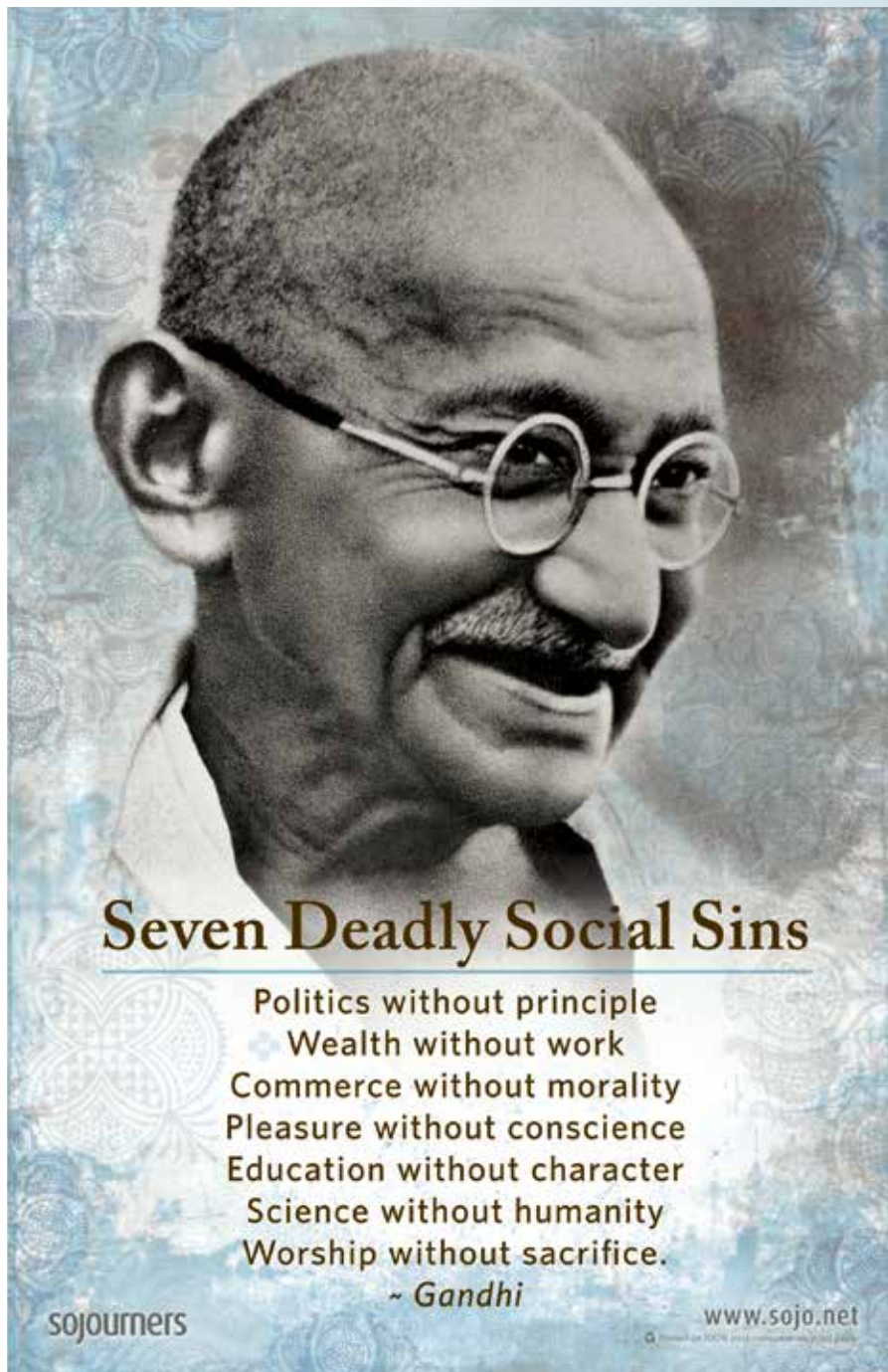
Reading Obama's speech gave me insight into the decisions of two great men, who looked to different faiths for courage when faced with fear in the same park 50 years apart.

King got up and marched. Nashashibi knelt down and prayed. ■



Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes about social justice from his perspective as a Muslim American.

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White evangelicals have one of the highest rates of gun ownership in the U.S. and are the least likely to support gun regulation. This is **A THEOLOGICAL EMERGENCY.**

Should Christians Own Guns?

by ROB SCHENCK

SITTING AT A DINING-ROOM TABLE full of fellow evangelical pastors, I asked how many were “carrying” (a euphemism for being armed with a concealed handgun). They all raised their hands. Then I asked, “What determines when you draw your gun and prepare to shoot another human being?” There was awkward body language and mumbling. After a few seconds passed, one older man said, “I’ll tell you what determines whether I draw the gun or not. It’s the man’s skin color.”

I was left speechless by the pastor’s jarring, blatant racism. Still, as respectfully as possible, I asked him to please clarify what he meant.





“Well, we got a big city nearby, and, you know, the black people there are always killin’ people. Now, if a colored man comes into this county, I know he means trouble because he knows he doesn’t belong here. That makes him more dangerous than a white man. That’s why I’d pull my gun.”

The man who was speaking, and the others nodding their heads in agreement, are my colleagues. I am one of them when it comes to a statement of faith—but not when it comes to race and guns.

‘Surrendering my life to Christ’

When I speak of evangelicals, I am speaking of my own. I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ as my lord and savior 42 years ago. I attended an evangelical Bible college and seminary and was ordained as an evangelical minister. I poured myself into evangelism and disciple-making. Today I’m a missionary to top government officials in Washington, D.C., and I chair one of the oldest associations of evangelical clergy in the country. I love my Lord, I love his people, and I love doing God’s work.

This is why I’m deeply concerned about American evangelicals. I believe the increased presence of firearms among American evangelicals, including pastors that are now armed in the pulpit and ready to shoot into the congregation if necessary, signals a serious moral crisis in the church. Those who should be all about the good news of God’s saving love for humanity are instead being led astray by a popular gun culture that contradicts the teaching and model of Jesus and the apostles.

White evangelicals, as a subgroup, have one of the highest rates of gun ownership and are least likely to support any type of gun regulation. We are also overwhelmingly Republican and politically conservative, making us particularly good recruitment prospects for pro-gun affinity organizations and lobby groups.

Facing a theological crisis

This pro-gun enthusiasm presents us with a temptation to abandon our faith in the one true God and trade it for a neo-pagan, fear-driven, earth-bound religion. This theological crisis is why I agreed to become one of the subjects of a documentary film exploring evangelicals

and the gun-culture phenomenon. Since its release in 2015, *The Armor of Light*, by director Abigail Disney, has been screened at film festivals and in theaters and churches, and it is part of a PBS primetime Independent Lens series on faith, deceit, guns, and power.

Having said all this, please don’t get me wrong; I am not completely “anti-gun.” In fact, I see a need for guns to maintain an orderly society, but this is something to be deeply regretted, not celebrated. What concerns me is a form of radical, gun-centered populism that promotes the idea of just about anyone brandishing a firearm in the name of personal self-defense, but without a serious, biblically oriented discussion of the moral and ethical implications of a Christian using deadly force.

The primary problem with evangelicals and guns is not the instrument itself, per se, but the attitudes that attend to its use. (Although in accidental shootings, including by children, I would argue that it is the instrument itself that is the problem.) Whenever someone intentionally carries a deadly weapon, he or she must be ready to kill. A military-trained firearms instructor explained it to me this way: “If you are not ready to kill, you are more dangerous with the weapon than without it, because it will likely be taken from you and used to kill you and others.”

Whom shall I kill?

Readiness to kill changes our disposition toward others. We must view the people around us through a lethal lens, asking, Whom will I kill? When will I kill? For what will I kill?

In carrying a gun for protection, one must also risk killing the wrong person, either because one shoots mistakenly or unjustifiably or because somebody is killed by a stray bullet. Such a disposition toward other human beings seems to me contradictory to three paramount New Testament principles: Love of neighbor, love of enemy, and fear of God only.

When Jesus was asked about the “greatest commandment,” he said there were actually two at the top of

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the list: “Love God” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The second means we’re to place our relationships to our fellow human beings above everything but God. The implications of this are myriad and profound, not the least of which is our respect for the sanctity of the other’s life.

Over the last several decades, evangelicals have formed a deep and biblically informed pro-life consensus. To be pro-life means we place the highest value on every human life, not on only some.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went on to say that we’re to value even the life of our enemy. This command was to be normative in the life of a Christian. The very rare act of sanctioned human killing, even if defensive during a violent confrontation, is, accordingly, abnormal.

Gun ownership: Right or choice?

The contemplation of taking another human life requires that we dehumanize certain people in our minds and hearts (as my colleagues did around the dining-room table). We must mentally place them into a “disposable class.”

This is where I’ve detected an inversion in the pro-life/pro-choice arguments. I’ve heard defenders of unrestricted gun rights use phrases such as “It’s my choice when it comes to how I defend myself or my family” and “Don’t impose your morality on me.” I think this gets at the heart of this problem. While abortion-rights advocates turn the unborn child into an impersonal “fetus,” gun-rights advocates turn a real or imagined attacker into a “threat,” “target,” “center mass,” or “head shot.”

This depersonalization leads to a false idea that it’s

not a life that’s been taken, only a “threat” that has been “neutralized.”

Valuing human life requires we assiduously maintain respect for the humanity of every person, including his or her identity as a creation of God made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). Christians are in the business of preserving human dignity and human life. “Packing heat” runs counter to this discipline. A gun is a cheap substitute (and dangerous shortcut) to preserving and protecting human life and, I argue, presents a constant temptation to do the opposite. The gun creates an allure for its owner to become the most powerful person in any encounter with another individual. In fact, the possession of a deadly weapon creates the illusion that the gun owner dominates all others in any given space. Yet Jesus tells us, “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43).

In the one and only instance in which Jesus appears to approve of his disciples acquiring deadly weapons (Luke 22:38), they say to him, “Lord, look, here are two swords.” He responds emphatically, “It is enough!” In other words, Jesus didn’t endorse a civilian militia armed to the teeth with any number or kind of weapons. He implicitly placed a limit on the number and type of weapons they could possess. This is analogous to how society generally limits the use of defensive firearms to a relative few police officers and military service members. In other words, it’s not everyone with a gun, ready to shoot anyone, under any circumstances; rather, it’s only a few with guns, and they are highly trained, highly regulated,

A THEOLOGICAL EMERGENCY.

To be pro-life means we place
the highest value on every human
life, not on only some.

A THEOLOGICAL EMERGENCY.

Popular gun culture contradicts the teaching and model of Jesus and the apostles.

and held highly accountable for the lethal use of their weapons. This is a diminution of human power. To arm every citizen—to arm every church member—is, instead, an inflation of human power.

Of whom shall I be afraid?

In a pastoral sense, my concern is not simply the inherent physical danger presented by a population awash with weaponry but also the psychological damage done to the shooter in the wake of a fatal shooting. Even in the most legally justifiable killings, trauma, guilt, remorse, and regret are left in the aftermath. Military chaplains refer to this effect as “moral injury.” I’ve worked with military personnel and law enforcement officers that have suffered this emotional and spiritual damage. Killing in real life is nothing like it is portrayed to be in films or video games. The stress and depression that result from the killing act, as well as self-doubt, self-condemnation, and vivid, uncontrollable recall too often contribute to addictions, the demise of intimate relationships, and suicide.

Related to this realm of mental, emotional, and spiritual health is the role of fear in the evangelical rush toward guns. My research indicates that the primary interest in defensive gun ownership and use among evangelicals is driven by fear of everything from home invasions and carjacking to end-times, apocalyptic persecution of Christians. Church leaders often tell me their congregants are afraid that a child will be kidnapped, wives and daughters will be raped, a crazed gunman will open fire on their congregations, or ISIS terrorists will target Christians wherever we may be.

The Bible is clear on God’s will for God’s people when it comes to fear. From beginning to end, scripture is replete with divine pronouncements to “fear not.” Nowhere is this instruction clearer, more authoritative, or more relevant to our subject than in the words of Christ: “I tell you, my friends, don’t be terrified by those who can kill the body but after that can do nothing more. I’ll show you whom you should fear: Fear the one who, after you have been killed, has the authority to throw you into hell. Indeed, I tell you, that’s the one you should fear” (Luke 12:4-5).

For a Christian to transfer fear from God to an earthly entity is to commit a form of idolatry. Trading our trust in divine protection for a fantastical pearl-handled revolver and silver bullet is to exchange the heavenly for the earthly. In an Advent sermon I preached on this subject at the Washington National Cathedral, I summarized this point by asking: “Who will ultimately save us, Jesus or something else? Christ or a Glock? Will our salvation be of our own making or will it be of ‘The Lord our Righteousness’?”

In respecting the Second Amendment, we must be careful we don’t violate the second of the Ten Commandments, which prohibits the worship of idols made by human hands.

State of emergency

The ownership and use of firearms for personal protection by Christians is far from a simple subject. The proliferation of “defensive” firearms in the evangelical community, including more and more in the sanctuary, presents profoundly consequential moral and ethical questions. It may also indicate of a failure of faith. The flippancy shown by some well-known evangelical personalities when discussing guns has certainly not served well our witness for the gospel, and it may be contributing to a spiritual crisis. The silence of church leaders on this subject has done nothing to ameliorate the severity of the problem.

This disease of the heart must be eradicated lovingly, pastorally, and biblically. It is past time for pastors, theologians, Bible teachers, and Christian ethicists to take up the issue of guns and lethal personal defense among the people of God as a theological emergency. ■

Rev. Rob Schenck is president of Faith and Action in Washington, D.C., chair of the Evangelical Church Alliance, and a senior fellow at the Oxford Centre for the Study of Law and Public Policy. He’s the subject of *The Armor of Light*, a film by Abigail Disney that explores growing gun enthusiasm among U.S. evangelicals, which premieres May 10 on PBS.

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Gun Talk

Fostering dialogue with those who disagree with you on firearms.

by CHARLES E. GUTENSON

SO YOU WANT TO HAVE a chat with someone on the other side of the gun control debate, but you're worried that it could quickly go south, descending into interminable and acrimonious debate. Well, fear not! Here are a few simple guidelines that can help avoid that outcome.

1. Resist false dichotomies

There are a wide range of positions that Americans hold on issues related to gun control. Polls consistently show that most gun owners support some degree of gun regulation. Similarly, few of those who choose not to own a gun believe that, therefore, no one should be allowed to own a gun. Given this, why does the debate so quickly deteriorate to: "You and Obama wanna take my guns!" on the one side and "You folks just don't care about the gun violence epidemic!" on the other? The first step toward mutually respectful dialogue is to get rid of the false dichotomies.

2. Don't caricature the other side

It's an unfortunate part of our everyday discourse that we often attempt to dismiss our opponent's position by creating an absurd caricature of it. You know the drill. Someone makes a sympathetic comment about gun regulation and the response is: "Oh, so you want to repeal the Second Amendment!" This sort of caricature avoids serious engagement with the issue by recasting it in terms that exaggerate or misrepresent the other's position. Serious engagement on this issue, or any other, for that matter, requires careful attention to what the person actually says. Resist the temptation to cheapen the discussion by caricaturing the other's position.

3. Look for common ground

Once we give up the false dichotomies and avoid caricaturing the other side, we can begin to look for points of agreement. Can we agree that certain gun usages are appropriate? Then say so. Can we agree that certain groups of people should not be allowed to own guns? Then grant your opponent this point. Can we agree, and surely we can, that a school shooting every week, on average, is too many? Look for the

points of agreement and, from there, begin to discuss different kinds of solutions ... *and* be willing to "try on" different solutions without arbitrarily ruling out some because they do not align with our ideologies.

4. Listen

A friend of mine used to say, "Listening is more than just waiting for your turn to talk." Too often we are mentally preparing our next counterpoint, rather than really hearing our discussion partner. If we approach a discussion on gun control with the main objective to "win the debate," then the conversation will likely descend to a heated exchange of points and counterpoints. Approach the discussion with the goal of understanding and being understood, and take the time to listen. This will encourage our discussion partner to do the same. Give up the need to "win," and seek instead to really hear the other side.

"Listening is more than just waiting for your turn to talk."

5. Admit the other side has valid points

An old cliché goes, "Even a stopped clock is right twice a day." It is virtually impossible for a person to be wrong on every aspect of a given subject. So when we engage with someone on an issue such as gun regulation, be reasonable in admitting the validity of at least some points of the other side. Little can serve to reduce tensions in a difficult conversation more than a respectful "You have a good point there." Such a response is not a sign of weakness, but an indicator that you are willing to be fair.

Too many discussions on difficult topics end up with friends angry at each other, but they need not. Follow these simple rules and you'll find respectful and productive dialogue to be easier than you think! ■

Charles E. Gutenson is a church consultant and former chief operating officer at Sojourners. His most recent book is Church Worth Getting Up For.

Courtesy of Steve Elliott

After nine people were killed at Oregon's Umpqua Community College in October, journalist and gun owner Steve Elliott decided to dismantle his handgun and disable the parts. He posted his actions on social media and launched the hashtag #ONELESSGUN.





"You can't tell me you
love me and when I'm
thirsty you don't give
me something
to drink."

—activist **Monica
Lewis-Patrick**

Thirsting for Democracy

In the Michigan water crisis, the roots of the problem go a lot deeper than contaminated pipes.

How are a poisoned water supply in Flint and water shut-offs in Detroit connected? Tommy Airey, co-editor of *RadicalDiscipleship.net*, talked with Detroit activists Monica Lewis-Patrick and Cecily McClellan to get the story behind the story.

LONG BEFORE water shut-offs and poisoning in Flint, democracy in much of Michigan had been hijacked. By the time a governor-appointed “emergency manager” was foisted on Detroit in spring 2013, every large black-majority city in Michigan—from Flint to Benton Harbor to Highland Park to Saginaw—had been appointed an EM, stripping all powers from elected leadership while possessing the authority to renegotiate or cancel union contracts, hire and fire government employees, and sell, lease, or privatize local assets.

Two years ago, about the same time that Flint’s EM transferred the city’s water source from Detroit’s water system to the highly toxic Flint River, Detroit’s EM ordered the city water and sewerage department to begin shutting off the water of all Detroiters who were two months or more behind on their water bills.

Today, in a city with 40 percent of its population surviving below the poverty line, Detroit water rates are twice the national average, and an estimated 100,000 residents, including many elderly folks and children, have had their water shut off by the city. The measures are forcing many longtime, low-income residents, the majority of them black, to leave the city.

Since 2008, the grassroots organization We the People of Detroit (WPD), led by five African-American women, has been creatively resisting emergency management—first of the school system and then the entire city—with a steady campaign of awareness-raising, canvassing, water delivery and advocacy for shut-off victims, and a comprehensive mapping project soon to be released.

Monica Lewis-Patrick is the charismatic, energetic point guard of the group, fueled by the Holy Ghost and her morning standard: a cup of coffee sweetened with four sugar packets. Lewis-Patrick, who’s a grandmother and the mother of two teenage daughters, lost her bid for

Long before water shut-offs and poisoning, democracy in much of Michigan had been hijacked.

Monica Lewis-Patrick, co-founder of We the People of Detroit, speaks out against privatization of public assets and the shutting off of water supplies to poor city residents.

We the People of Detroit



“We need to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing is emergency management.”

—Cecily McClellan

city council two years ago by a few hundred votes. A few weeks later, she lost her only son to gun violence.

Cecily McClellan, the quiet, confident, all-business power forward of Team WPD, is a retired city employee and former vice-president of the Association of Professional and Technical Employees.

I spoke with them at WPD headquarters on the third floor of St. Peter's Episcopal Church—a stone's throw from a downtown getting a corporate facelift financed by public bonds, subsidies, and tax abatements to draw companies in from the suburbs, while many residents struggle just to survive and keep their homes. —**Tommy Airey**

Tommy Airey: Let's get this straight: Are you advocating for free water for low-income Detroiters?

Monica Lewis-Patrick: Free water has never been the ask. Personally, I'm not opposed to free water. I believe that water is a human right, and that everyone should have access to it. But the ask here in Detroit has always been for *affordable* water.

What are the mayor's objections to an affordability plan in Detroit?

Lewis-Patrick: Over the last 11 months, water shut-offs have led to more foreclosures and pushing people out of the city. We believe [city officials] do not want to participate in a water-affordability plan because it would allow more people to stay in the city, especially in communities they want cleared out for future development.

Is this a conspiracy?

Lewis-Patrick: Conspiracy, in my mind, isn't the appropriate term, because a lot of times people marginalize conspiracy as just somebody's idea or accusation. What I would say is that it has been a collaborative, well-orchestrated system of evil. We know for a fact, through all the political analysis and economic research that has been done, that the city bankruptcy didn't have to go down. People saw it as an opportunity to be able to divest from the water department, to weaken the water department intentionally.

Flint was actually advised by the governor and his emergency managers to come

off of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department system and then to become a part of another water system called KWA [Karegnondi Water Authority]. Flint was the largest external customer of the Detroit water system. How is it that you are advising us to become financially solvent, while at the same time all your deeds are making us insolvent?

Some have claimed that this is not just about economic austerity measures but about white supremacy. What do you think?

Lewis-Patrick: I would agree that white supremacy plays a significant role. We see it play out definitely in terms of Detroit vs. the rest of the state. We constantly hear this narrative of Detroiters being characterized as children, that the state had to come in and manage its affairs. Of course, they'll never say, “Black folks can't lead themselves,” but it's implied with their language. There are other cities across Michigan that are majority white that have worse financial conditions in terms of their municipal governance, but they haven't even been threatened with emergency management, whereas all of the communities in the state that have more than a 51 percent African-American population have some form of “consent agreement” or emergency management.

When did you first hear about possible lead poisoning in Flint's water, and when did you start to publicly raise awareness about it?

Lewis-Patrick: In July 2014, we participated in a joint mobilization effort here in Detroit to do a protest called Turn the Water On. A couple of people from Flint that we invited showed up with bottles of water. They were asking us to help them identify people who could test that water. We took on a major role when my colleague and co-founder Debra Taylor took on a project with the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion. In March 2015, Debra brought together about six organizations from Flint to help them mobilize a community story-telling process, to help them tell what they knew about these situations. Debra had been working on this for six months at that point, to help them gather their stories, identifying who could tell their stories safely.

Are you concerned that all of the attention that Flint is getting is leaving Detroit high and dry?

Lewis-Patrick: Not at all. Flint always lifts up the fact that a lot of what they learned, in terms of responding to their own crisis, they learned from Detroit. And we always lift up the fact that when we were in the highest point of our crisis, Flint consistently showed up for us. We see this as a collaborative effort. We see this as not separate water crises, but as one water crisis, as part of the world water crisis.

Cecily McClellan: The poisoning of Flint is just elevating the issues that are going on in Detroit. We recognize that we have been hurt financially, devastated as a community economically, suffering from assets getting sold off. But you are talking about devastation on another scale when you're talking about the lead poisoning of children. The governor has not hired a plumber, but instead a public relations firm so that they can do all the spinning, to keep the attention off this issue.

We are all in this together. If they get away with doing it here, they are going to do it everywhere. We need to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing is emergency management. If you had people that could speak and vote for themselves, none of this would have happened.

A lot of folks inside and outside of Michigan are asking how they can be involved in this fight. You [Lewis-Patrick] recently commissioned a crowd of community organizers to deputize themselves. What did you mean?

Lewis-Patrick: It is a phrase and a concept that I adopted from Detroit City Councilmember JoAnn Watson. She would never leave a meeting without fully explaining to people their responsibility to get involved in their own lives and be a part of saving themselves—that you couldn't wait on government, couldn't wait on your religious leaders, you couldn't even wait on your block club captain to respond to your needs. No one knows better about what you need than you. That, for me, was speaking to the vastly different fronts of this fight: to the artists and to young people who do not know where they fit. That was clearly defining for everyone in the room—that there

was space for you in this struggle, in this movement.

A lot of times, people don't understand all the intentional structuring of incidents to make people believe it is their fault. We the People has a phrase that we use: "It's not your fault, but it is your fight."

What is the connection of Christian faith to the struggle for clean and affordable water for all?

Lewis-Patrick: Christian faith? Woooo! It's knee-deep in this! When I advocate for someone to have water, it is not based on whether I like them or not. I believe that every human being has a right to water. That is a core part of my faith. The Word talks about how we are to plead for the fatherless and motherless and to defend the widow and to visit those in jail and we are to feed the hungry. That's the charge that we have.

You can't tell me you love me and when I'm hungry you don't show up. You can't tell me you love me and when I'm thirsty you don't give me something to drink. We want love to show up in us. I believe God *is* love, and because of this I must care if people have water and I have to do all I can do to be a part of that solution.

You've said that the city must go beyond philanthropic "do good in the hood" projects. What's Detroit's comeback look like, from your perspective?

Lewis-Patrick: A true comeback would look like equity. It would not look like the corporations that are being invited in and touted as saving the city, while they are taking advantage of resources that they are not paying for. It would not look like the communities where people are suffering due to disenfranchisement and loss of jobs. It would not look like our children being shuffled monthly from school to school or having to be in schools with no heat or limited access to toilets, no notebooks, no teachers.

It would look like equity. When the police show up, instead of them shooting us, they would talk to us and treat us as human beings. It would look like contracts and job opportunities being afforded to everyone. Those are things that we see as differences between this touted "comeback" and what we see in the communities. It is not equitable. It is not a broad inclusion of everyone in the city. ■

Poetry

BY D.S. MARTIN

& (ampersand)

What I love about the ampersand is its compactness
& the way it's open to new & unexpected possibilities
almost forming an eternal figure eight — but not quite
for when the sentence seems to be over
or approaching its end — the ampersand appears
like the first of a hundred thousand well-armed angels
emerging from the backseat of a Volkswagen & improbable hope
erupts — like a new sunrise — sharply piercing the skin of dark night
with radiating shards of light
& despite the smug sleep — of the ninety nine sheep
when the wanderer's gone — the good shepherd appears
with it draped across his shoulders — & the lost coin
is swept from the cobwebs
& the prodigal stumbles home — where his father watches
& waits — & refuses to lose hope — scanning the horizon
for his returning son — & then he grabs the hem of his garment
& runs — & it's then we recognize the continual pattern
of conflict & resolution — of estrangement & reconciliation
& even of death & resurrection
a pattern that is by no means inevitable — but woven
like the arms of a twisting ampersand
into the fabric of the universe

D.S. Martin's most recent collection of poetry is Conspiracy of Light. He lives in Ontario, Canada.

A Little Child Shall Lead Them

Jesus shook up his followers with his radical inclusion of children. Perhaps our Sunday worship should do the same.

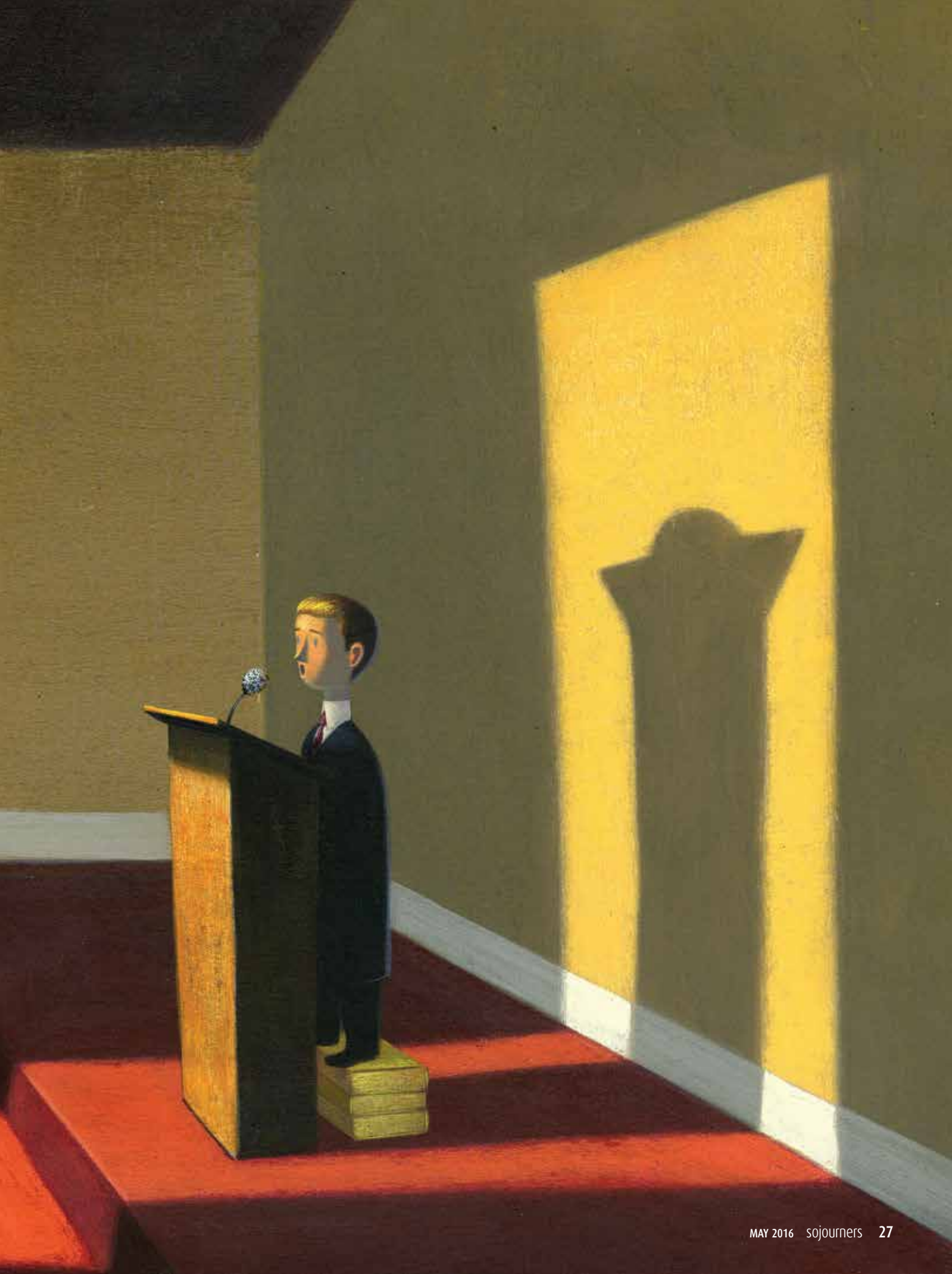
by **DAVID M. CSINOS** • illustration by **JON KRAUSE**

DURING ALL THE Sunday mornings I spent in church as a child, I only cried once. After months of encouragement from my parents, I decided to go to our Catholic parish's children's liturgy (their version of Sunday school). I remember nothing else about that morning except that I stood in the corner crying while kind volunteers tried to calm me down with a few cookies. I never went to children's liturgy again, and I'm thankful the experience didn't leave me scarred for life, unable to eat another cookie.

My dislike of children's liturgy wasn't about what it was; it had to do with what it *wasn't*. I grew up watching Mass unfold from the front pew, where I could be as close to the action as possible. Going to the basement meant that I had to give up the beauty, wonder, and fascination I experienced during church services.

Kids
These
Days

Including children isn't just the trendy thing to do—it's a matter of justice.



It's been more than 25 years since I lost my composure on that fateful Sunday, and my dissatisfaction with children's liturgy is now echoed by ministers, Christian educators, and parents who realize the importance of including children in corporate worship. But as I see it, including children in corporate worship isn't a matter of choice or changing trends; it's a matter of justice.

"When your children ask you ..."

Practices for including children in worship are far from new. Children's ministry leaders refer to Deuteronomy 6 so often that memorizing this passage might as well be a prerequisite for working with kids in churches! Many interpretations of this chapter focus on the first few verses—"Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children ..."—and emphasize the importance of teaching God's commandments to children in all times and places. Yet a crucial point in this text appears in verse 20, which begins, "When your children ask you ..."

By using "when" instead of "if," the author of Deuteronomy assumes that children will be curious about "the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded" because they are present to witness and participate in those decrees and statutes in the first place. After all, how can children be curious about something they haven't experienced?

Scripture is filled with examples of children being present—and even having primary roles—in liturgies and everyday practices of faith. Take the institution of Passover in Exodus 12. God instructs the people of Israel to practice a rite of remembrance with their children, saying again, "When your children ask ..." Even today, young children do not simply observe the Passover Seder; they have one of the most important roles. By asking questions about why this ritual is practiced in a particular way, the story of God's liberating work is told anew for all who are present. Similarly, after Israel crosses the Jordan, God instructs Joshua to build a stone memorial, and once again God paints a picture of children asking about the meaning of those stones for generations to come (Joshua 4).

In the New Testament, we see Jesus continuing to place importance on the presence and participation of children. In a context

where children were often perceived to be at the same level as animals, the hugs that Jesus gives children are incredibly radical actions. Unlike the pastel-infused scenes of smiling (white) children sitting on and around a gentle (white) Jesus that adorn many Sunday school classrooms, Jesus' attitudes toward children subverted and undermined the social order of the day.

In Mark 9, for example, Jesus responds to a dispute among his disciples about who is the greatest by lifting up a child into his arms and saying that the greatest is the one who welcomes these little children. Only verses later, he goes so far as to say that children are exemplary members of the reign of God. It's easy to overlook the sheer importance of the fact that children were among Jesus' closest followers, so much so that all Jesus had to do was sit down and pick one up.

The varieties of inclusion

As a speaker and writer about the faith formation of children and youth, I've had the privilege of learning about all sorts of ways that churches are taking steps to include children in worship. There's no one right way to do it, and congregational practices are all over the map, but I find it helpful to think of the various practices for including children as a spectrum.

On one side of the spectrum is *no inclusion*. These congregations organize activities for children that remove them from the broader worshipping community. Churches might have Sunday school or children's church that lasts for the entirety of services, with parents dropping their kids off in a separate space when they arrive and gathering them again after the service is over.

The next point along the spectrum is *nominal inclusion*. These churches might have children join the whole congregation for part or all of services, often having a children's time or song early in the liturgy. They may even provide activity kits that include items such as quiet games, books, and coloring pages that children can use in their pews. Some churches might even set up an activity station in the sanctuary where children and families can go to create artwork or play with quiet toys during the service. From my experience, the majority of congregations that are working to include children within their communal worship operate around this

point on the spectrum, which makes room for the presence of children, but not their active participation.

Moving along the spectrum we next come to the marker of *moderate inclusion*. In these congregations, children begin to participate and even contribute in the service by offering a reading, making announcements, leading special music, taking up the offering, or even processing in with the minister or priest. Mainline and liturgical congregations tend to have the edge here because their pre-planned and varied orders of worship readily offer multiple ways for children to contribute to the service.

Churches with moderate inclusion also open up activities and initiatives for people of any and all ages. One way this can happen is when congregations invite all people to participate in activity stations or more interactive and experiential approaches

Jesus' example subverts the age-segregated, exclusive, and adult-centric norms that underpin worship.

to worship. Another approach is to leave Sunday morning services as they are, and set up alternative services that more actively involve children. Some congregations might host a monthly Messy Church program on Sunday evenings, while others create their own worship experiences that might happen once a year or once a week. Unlike Sunday school programs, which separate children from the rest of the church, alternative services do not operate at the same time as corporate worship, providing different times and spaces in which people of all ages can gather together for worship.

The final point on the spectrum is *radical inclusion*. Congregations at this mark are rare, for to be radically inclusive is not only to allow children to participate in worship but to be open to having congregational worship be changed by their full presence and participation. This is much easier said than

done, for it takes Jesus' example so seriously that it subverts the age-segregated, exclusive, and adult-centric norms that underpin worship. It is so radical, in fact, that even the word *inclusive* is subverted. No longer can there be active adults who *include* and passive children who *are included*. All must be invited to welcome and include one another. Adults include children. But children also include adults. Living fully into Jesus' command to welcome children—and be welcomed by them—means we need to be open to being changed.

Sharing the reins

A decade ago, theologian Marcia Bunge offered a major contribution to the intersection of children and theology by deciphering six perspectives of children and childhood that have existed within Christian tradition. In her words, they are:

- gifts of God and sources of joy,
- sinful creatures and moral agents,
- developing beings who need instruction and guidance,
- fully human and made in the image of God,
- models of faith and sources of revelation, and
- orphans, neighbors, and strangers in need of justice and compassion.

How a congregation works to include children often depends on the theological perspective that dominates its vision of children. For example, a church that sees children through the second and third perspectives may not include children because it sees Sunday school as a means for guiding children along the right path. Similarly,

a congregation that views children as made in God's image might engage in practices that lead to moderate inclusion.

Of Bunge's six views, the one that often seems to be least applicable to debates about including children is "orphans, neighbors, and strangers in need of justice and compassion." In the church, we often picture "orphans and strangers" as children *outside* of our congregation, perhaps the recipients of our outreach ministries, such as the thousands of children in Flint, Mich., who will forever carry the marks of lead poisoning. But what happens when we look at our own children through this lens, our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews, our grandchildren who come to church with us?

When we see *all* children through this perspective, the conversation about including children in congregational worship

first step is to assess your church's current position: Are children present in congregational worship? Are there ways for children to participate? Is the worship changed by children's participation? After assessing where your church falls on the spectrum of inclusion, identify practices that reach toward including children more fully—and implement them!

For example, if your congregation encourages children to remain in the full service by providing them with quiet activities, perhaps you can set up an experiential worship station where children and adults alike can experience prayer and worship during the service through coloring mandalas, painting images evoked by the hymns and sermon, and engaging in other activities that allow them to experiment as they participate in the service.

If your church already has such moderately inclusive practices, you could move toward radical inclusion by changing your liturgy (gasp!). Instead of a sermon, people of all ages could act out the day's reading in a reader's theater style and then chat with one another about the experience. Some congregations I know have station-based worship for a portion of Sunday services, where people can move about the sanctuary to experience God by lighting candles and praying, serving one another communion around small standing tables, and writing (or drawing) their prayers on a prayer wall. Rather than billing these activities as optional add-ons (like moderately inclusive activity stations), practices such as these move toward radical inclusion by altering and adapting worship styles in light of children.

Whatever you do to work toward inclusion, remember: You don't have to change everything at once. But to work toward the justice and love that Jesus demonstrated when he said that the kingdom of God belongs to little children (Mark 10:14), change is needed. ■

David M. Csinos (davecsinos.com) is founder and executive director of Faith Forward (faith-forward.net), an ecumenical network for innovation in ministry with children and youth, coauthor of *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus*, and coeditor of *Faith Forward and Faith Forward*, Volume 2.

begins to change. Suddenly, including children isn't an optional choice; it rests firmly in God's command to seek justice in our world. Much like multicultural worship, radical inclusion of children demands that we put our own values, assumptions, and preferences on hold so that we can more fully embrace the other. It means at some point all people will be uncomfortable as congregations radically rethink what "counts" as worship, dismantle exclusive practices, and imagine new ways of worshipping together that hear the voices of all ages. And it also means that adults should empower children to take the reins, not knowing where they will lead us but having faith that God's reign belongs to them.

Getting there

So how can congregations move toward greater levels of inclusion with children? The





It's Not Really About the WAFFLES

A child-centered worship service encourages a sticky faith.

Kids These Days

LAST YEAR, *St. Lydia's church in Brooklyn, N.Y., started a monthly service that lifts up children's leadership and participation. They call it Waffle Church, and it's messy on purpose. Olivia Whitener, an editorial assistant at Sojourners, interviewed Waffle Church minister Sarah McCaslin in January about the service that revolves around songs, stories, maple syrup, and the love of Jesus.*

Sojourners: Why waffles?

Rev. Sarah McCaslin: Well, I prefer a savory brunch option, if given the choice. But "Omelet Church" just doesn't have the same ring. The fact of the matter is: Who doesn't love a waffle? They're easy to make, they're delicious. But the waffles aren't as important as the idea of this meal we share around the table. It isn't that we're going to church and then will have waffles. When we sit around the table together and fellowship together, it's an extension of communion.

What's special about a Waffle Church service? The first time we did Waffle Church, I was standing at the table, and I do a rhetorical-question-style liturgy: "Look, we are gathered around this table, and we set it with our finest. This is not the Lutheran table, it's not St. Lydia's table, it's not Waffle Church's table. Whose table is this?" Then a 6-year-old shouts, "It's the Lord's table!" We couldn't have planned it, and it was just amazing. Of course, now we *have* to do it because there's always the kid who wants to shout "It's the Lord's table!" And so here's a piece of the liturgy that has been fixed because

the children will demand it. That kind of stuff is just happening all the time.

Are there ways other churches can incorporate a Waffle Church service into their ministries?

I think it's about creating a physical space that can accommodate the needs of children. The music is the other major piece of it. At St. Lydia's, we adhere to the paperless-music singing tradition, where all of the songs are taught. So there's no hymnal, no lyrics to be read—those things tend to privilege literacy. This way, children and adults can participate in the music each and every week.

How do Jesus' words "let the little children come to me" influence Waffle Church?

There's a boy who comes to Waffle Church who's about 17 months old. His dad says that at home he's playing with play dough, and he's breaking the play dough and saying, "The bread! The bread!" Those connections [to communion] are being made so early. What is going to happen when that 17-month-old is 3 years old and 5 years old and still breaking the bread once a week or once a month, and still going to that table time and time again, hearing those same words of welcome? And hearing them as spoken to *him*.

We understand the table as being extended to *all* people, and especially to those who sit at the margins. So when we welcome children at the table, we're not just saying children, we're saying *everybody*. They may not know what it is they're doing when they do it, but they're participating in something that God has already provided to them. ■

Photos courtesy of St. Lydia's



Shutterstock



Rev. Sarah McCaslin leads a youth-centered Waffle Church service in Brooklyn. The informal worship includes the paperless music tradition where all songs are taught without hymnals or lyrics to be read.

5 WAYS TO TEACH KIDS ABOUT JUSTICE

Readers often ask us: How can I incorporate a hunger for justice into my child's spiritual formation? How do we help the youngest

Kids
These
Days

members of the church understand the gospel's call to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves? *Sojourners* asked five Christian parents engaged in various forms of justice work to share their best tips for helping children put their faith into action. Here's what they said:

1. Look for Teachable Moments

2. Confront Hard Truths
Head-On

3. Welcome New Traditions

4. Tell Stories, Especially
Your Own

5. Honor Kids as Part of
the Movement

Look for Teachable Moments

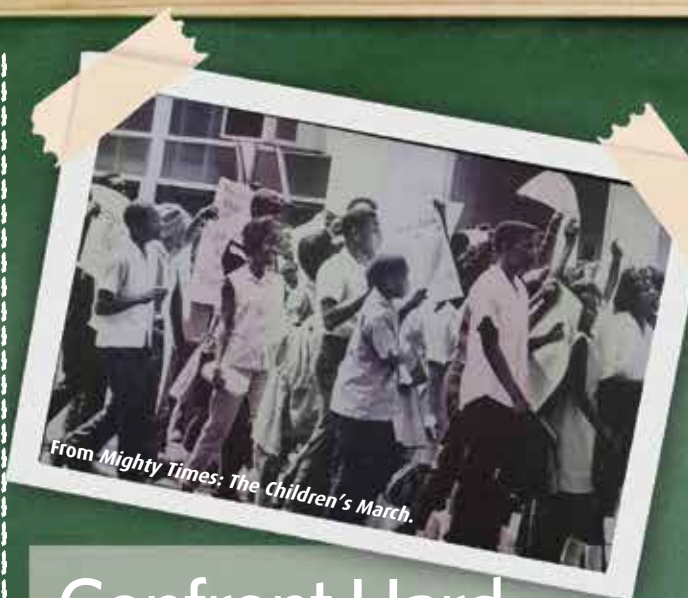
1 **MANY PARENTS FEEL** unprepared to talk about sex or faith with their children. I was one of those parents until I realized age-appropriate sexuality information could empower my children and keep them safe.

I also realized that teaching my kids about sexuality meant more than talking about “sex.” After all, if I didn’t talk to my kids about how Christian values of love, justice, and mutuality guide the care of our bodies and our relationship choices, who would?

So rather than planning for a single “big talk” or waiting until I know all the answers, I practice parenting through teachable moments. For example, in our house we talk about how clothing choices and hygiene reflect our thankfulness for our bodies as part of God’s good creation (including remembering to brush teeth!). As a parent, when I take a picture of my kids, I ask them for permission before posting it on social media; this encourages thinking-before-posting and consent as an active yes. And when we’re watching TV or listening to a song in the car about attraction or a relationship, I ask questions like: How would you feel in that situation? Do you think that person values their body? Does that seem like a mutual decision/relationship? Is that kind of love balancing God, neighbor, and self? In the short conversation, I always say something like, “Being in a relationship takes a lot of work and requires communication, honesty, commitment, and mutuality.” This models how to use one’s values to assess relationship choices.

These teachable moments—rather than hard and fast rules—encourage kids to be moral thinkers. Sure, there are times kids need sexual health information, and that requires a sit-down talk and some resources. But most teaching related to sexuality and faith comes from our modeling as parents and intentionally talking about our faith values related to everyday examples.

Kate Ott (kateott.org) is a parent, a professor of Christian ethics, and the author of *Sex + Faith: Talking with Your Child from Birth to Adolescence*.



From *Mighty Times: The Children's March*.

Confront Hard Truths Head-On

2 **FOR MLK DAY**, our sons’ elementary school hosted a screening of *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*. This documentary tells the story of the behind-the-scenes efforts to organize the 1963 children’s march for racial justice in Birmingham, Ala. At first, I wasn’t sure if my 7- and 9-year-old sons were ready to see such a stark depiction of the harsh realities faced by blacks—by *children* who looked *just like them*—in the Jim Crow South. I decided to take them, not for shock value but to affirm the strength and resolve of black people and to open the door to “the talk” about the history of racial injustice.

Teaching young black children about the tumultuous history of this country is not an easy thing to do. I wrestle with not wanting my sons to feel inferior because of racist practices that were hewn into the fabric of this country and, at the same time, I don’t want them to think that all white people are bad. I do want them to live into an understanding of themselves as vibrant, smart, and valuable human beings who are worthy of receiving and giving respect. The only way I’ve found to do that is to face the hard truths about racism head-on, while affirming my sons’ inherent worth and value. I knew I’d done the right thing when my 9-year-old asked me, “Mom, did any of the white people help the brown people?” Yes, son, they did.

Although we cannot shield our children from the horrors of racial injustice past or present, we can tell them the stories of how people worked together to achieve freedom and equality. It is from these lessons that we must continue to take stock and equip our children to be the new generation of freedom fighters.

Leah Gunning Francis is a seminary dean and the author of *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community* (Chalice Press, 2015).

Welcome New Traditions

3 **AT OUR HOUSE** on Christmas morning, the kids wake us up early, begging for permission to go downstairs and open the presents that appeared beneath the Christmas tree since they drifted off to sleep the night before.

They rip the wrapping paper eagerly, hoping and praying that we got them what they wanted. We try. And we usually meet with some success, thanks mostly to my wife's gifts of attention and generosity.

By 9 a.m. or so, the presents are unwrapped, breakfast is eaten ... even the trash has been taken out (hopefully by a grateful child). By now, our kids know the tradition: We load up in the family van with whoever else happens to be around the house and drive to Central Prison.

This isn't a tradition we started, but one we were welcomed into when we moved to North Carolina 14 years ago. People of faith who had been visiting incarcerated sisters and brothers knew that no one got visits on Christmas. To allow as many staff as possible to be home with their families, the prison keeps everyone in their cells and doesn't allow visitors. So these folks started gathering outside the prison on Christmas morning to sing carols. Because it's hard to hear through prison walls, we shout, "Jingle Bells." We also carry 6-foot letters that spell out "Merry Christmas."

We want our kids to know that we love them and that God loved them so much that Jesus came down from heaven to be with us. But we also want them to know that Jesus is locked up. "I was in prison and you visited me," he said. We cannot know God or be God's body in the world without knowing sisters and brothers across the prison line. Our Christmas tradition is a reminder of that. We celebrate "peace on earth and good will to all people" by driving every Christmas morning to shout good news across the walls. Sometimes, if we listen closely, we hear friends shouting good news back.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is co-founder of Rutba House, director of the School for Conversion, and author, with Rev. William J. Barber II, of The Third Reconstruction (Beacon Press, 2016).

The Reyes-Chow family



Tell Stories—Especially Your Own

4 **IT'S A STORY** my daughters have been told over and over again by their great-grandparents: how our family immigrated to the United States from China and the Philippines—the sacrifices they made, the discrimination they faced, and the community they experienced.

And it's a story I want my daughters to remember because I know it will help them to better understand the stories of others, especially the newcomers and immigrants who continue to come to the United States today. If we forget what generations before have done, we risk losing empathy, forgoing compassion, and creating structures that place obstacles before people who are simply trying to do what our own family did generations ago.

So in our family we try to do a few things to reinforce our commitment to our history:

We make sure to tell the stories that have been passed down from my grandparents to my parents and to me so that my daughters remember the laughter, tears, struggles, and joys.

We help connect the dots between then and now by drawing connections between the struggles that our families faced and the ones people face today.

When we have been able to, we have traveled to our familial villages in both the Philippines and China. A privilege and expense, but worth it.

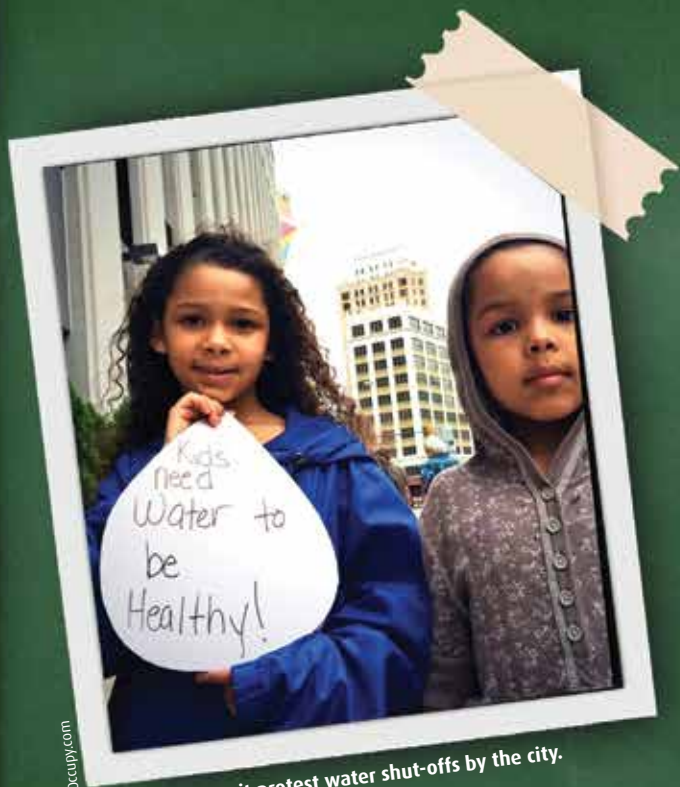
For other parents, my biggest piece of advice would be to begin by knowing the story, telling it over and over again, and then seeing where God is calling you to go with it: work with current immigrants, travel to one's homeland, or something else.

Remember where you've come from so that you treat those who are arriving today as if they too are worthy of the opportunities given to you, I tell my daughters. Your family was worthy and theirs is too.

Bruce Reyes-Chow is a writer, speaker, pastor, and dad. This article was adapted from Don't be an Asshat: An Official Handbook for Raising Parents and Children (2016) written by Bruce and his wife, Robin Pugh.



Christmas outside Central Prison



Children in Detroit protest water shut-offs by the city.

Last night, our toddler held our newborn's fist up in the air and declared, "Water is a human right!"

Honor Kids as Part of the Movement

5 **I HAVE TWO** kids who've only ever lived under the undemocratic rule of emergency management. Here in Detroit, that means 38,000 households are living without running water; up the road in Flint, it means people are suffering dangerously high lead levels from drinking their water. What does it mean as a parent to live in a state that will knowingly and secretly poison a generation of children if there is money to be gained?

Last night, our toddler held our newborn's fist up in the air and declared, "Water is a human right!" My heart swelled. When Isaac was born, we were clear that he was not a reason to flee the city or the movement but rather to commit deeper to this place and community where Beloved Community breathes.

Though Isaac may not be able to articulate what "water is a human right" fully means, he knows that it has something to do with where we put our bodies: holding signs on the street, picking people up from jail, long quiet hours in the courtroom, dropping off water to strangers' homes, running outside when the shut-off trucks pull onto our block, praying in church, and the songs that put him to sleep.

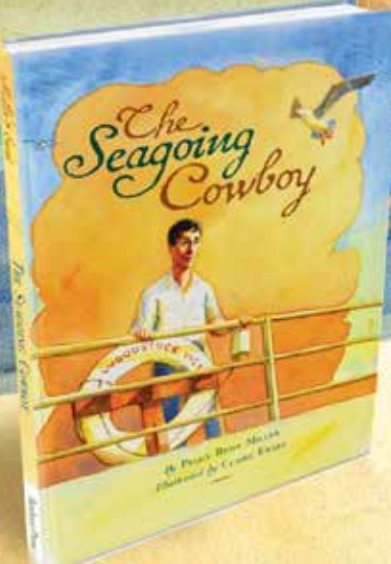
My work as a parent and activist these days has little to do with intellect or organizing, but rather focuses on the art of schlepping. It means taking the 45 minutes to put on mittens, go potty, and change diapers in order to arrive 30 minutes late to an hour-long rally. It's about packing enough string cheese and crayons to last the duration of a meeting.

I long for my children to be witnesses to resistance as resurrection, to find Detroit as a discipleship school, and to trust in a God of justice and love. So, we schlepp them along, constantly honoring their beings as members of this movement and praying that the fire ignites their hearts. ■

Lydia Wylie-Kellermann lives with her partner and their two children in Detroit. She is the co-editor of RadicalDiscipleship.net and writes a series on parenting called "Learning from Laughter."

Imagine if forgiveness and love were commonly spoken, if conflicts were resolved with a healing touch and everyone felt value and worth. Our children are ready to learn that language and we have been given the words of life. So let's speak to them of peace and justice. Let's tell them of Jesus and God's shalom. Let's teach our kids to shine in this world.

* Start small

A long time ago,
when I was looking for adventure,
I became a seagoing cowboy.

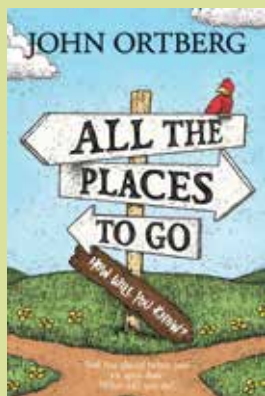
We didn't ride horses. We rode
waves

Come aboard and join author Peggy Reiff Miller and illustrator Claire Ewart as they share the story of Heifer International's original high-sea adventurers, who took livestock to people suffering the effects of World War II.



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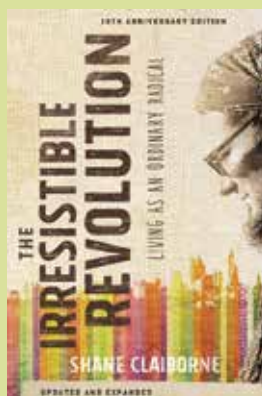
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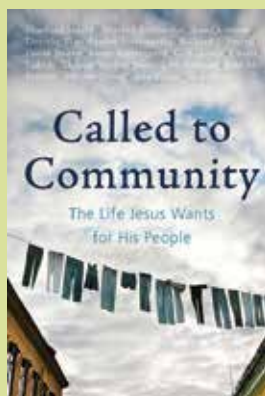
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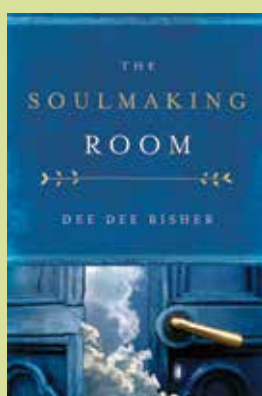
Claiborne uses unconventional examples from his life to stir up questions about the church and the world, while challenging readers to truly live out their Christian faith. New material throughout and a full new chapter.



Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People

Charles E. Moore, editor
Plough Publishing House
plough.com

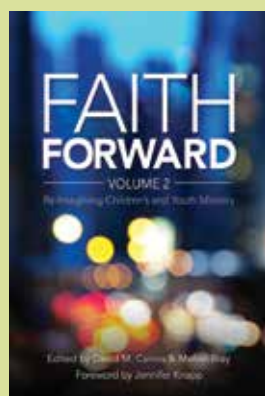
Are Christians meant to live in community? Here is sound advice from people who have: Benedict, Bonhoeffer, Nouwen, Merton, Vanier, Eberhard Arnold, Dorothy Day, John Perkins, and others in 52 weekly readings for group discussion.



The Soulmaking Room

Dee Dee Risher
Upper Room Books
bookstore.upperroom.org/
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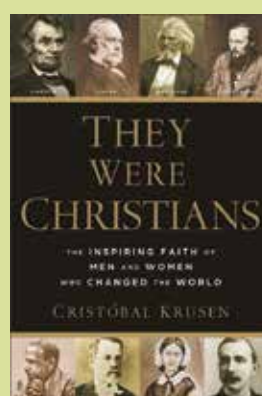
A memoir that shows how life's most painful times can shape us into our best, most authentic selves. A beautiful book filled with spiritually grounded wisdom.



Faith Forward Volume 2: Re-Imagining Children's and Youth Ministry

David M. Csinos & Melvin Bray, editors
Wood Lake Publishing Inc.
woodlake.com

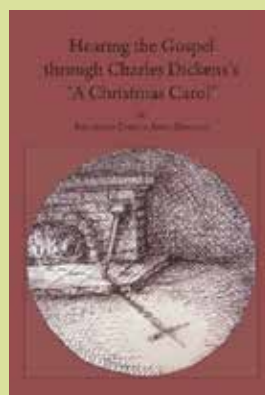
If you are seeking ways of facilitating children's and youth ministry that are grassroots, forward-thinking, ecumenical, innovative, and collaborative, *Faith Forward Volume 2* will provide inspiration and wisdom for the journey.



They Were Christians

Cristóbal Krusen
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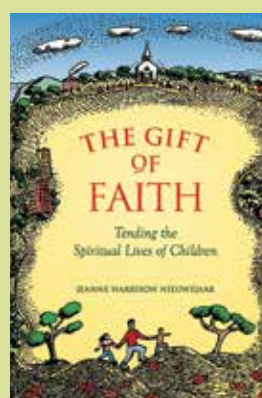
Cristóbal Krusen brings to light the little-known stories of faith behind 12 influential people of history. This book will inspire you to deepen your faith, pursue excellence in your vocation, and serve others.



Hearing the Gospel Through Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol"

Rev. Cheryl A. Kincaid
Cambridge Scholars Publishers
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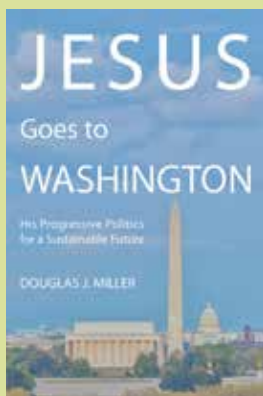
Rediscover the theological and sociological motivations Charles Dickens had for writing "A Christmas Carol." Learn how Charles Dickens placed the Advent lessons of the Anglican Prayer Book in the mouths of the spirits in "A Christmas Carol."



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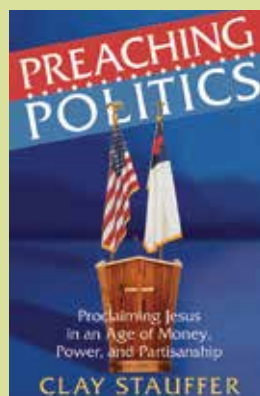
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Jesus Goes to Washington

Douglas J. Miller
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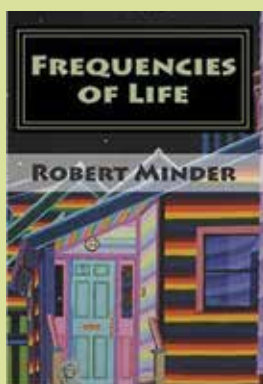
This book explores how Christian spirituality and the political ethic of Christianity's founder, Jesus of Nazareth, might contribute to the most looming emergency of our day—ending human misery while reducing the planet's woes.



Preaching Politics

Clay Stauffer
Chalice Press
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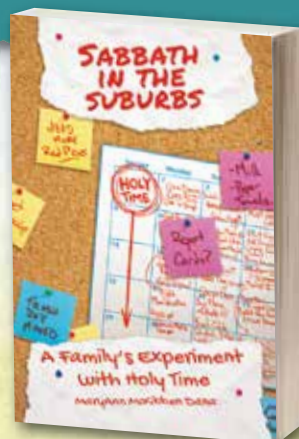
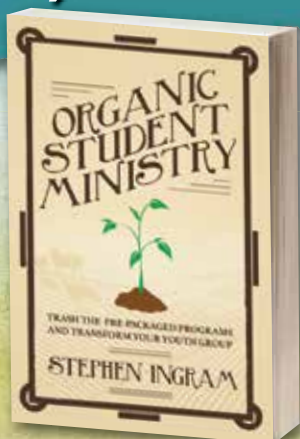


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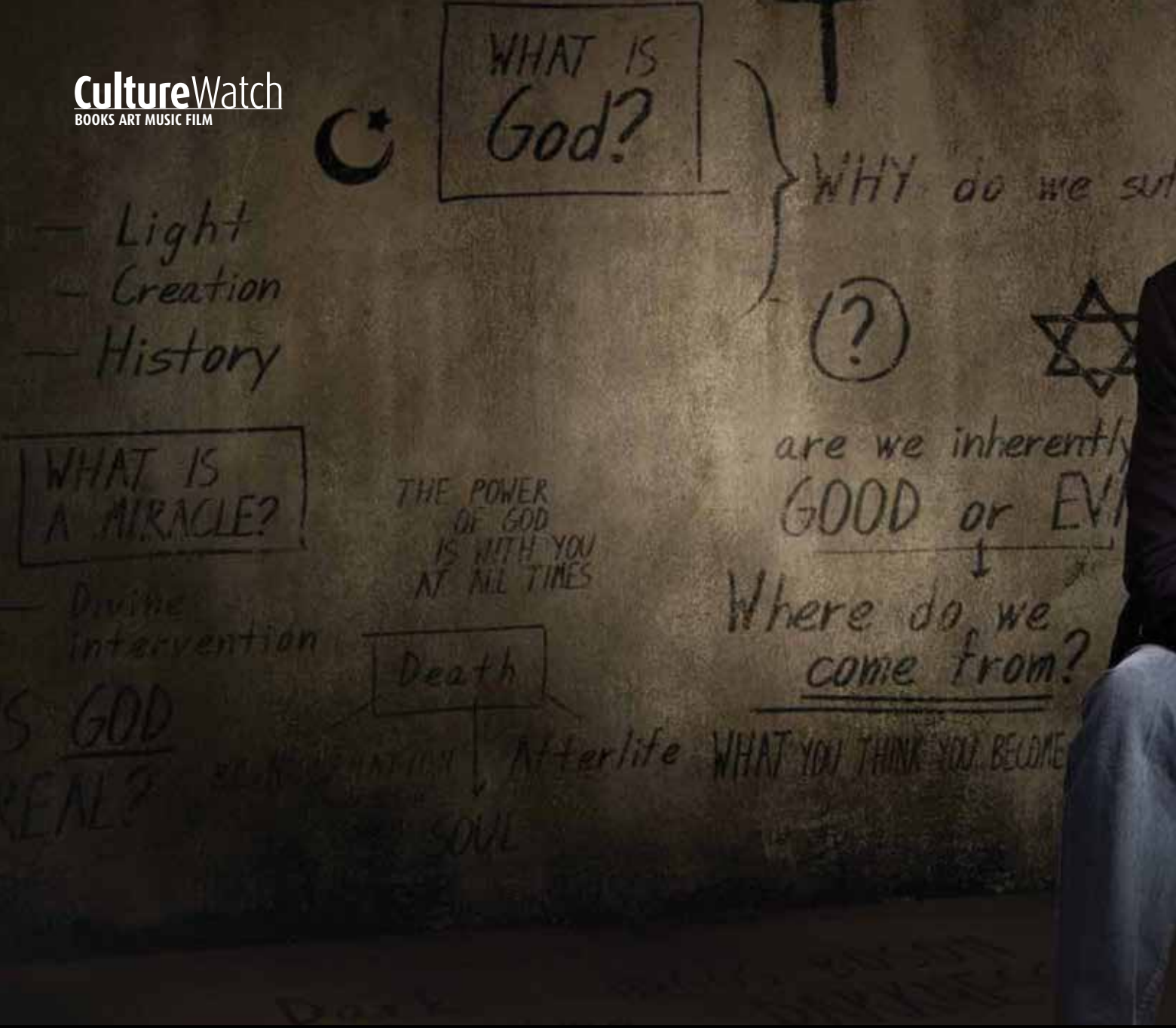
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By Julie Polter

Godly Stories

Morgan Freeman shepherds a cable TV journey through the world's faiths.

FEELING STRESSED BY CURRENT EVENTS, weary of ugly public discourse and the contentious sniping among even those who claim the same political party or faith? Maybe what you need is *context*—a look at the sweep of history and the enduring mysteries of existence. It'd be nice if there were a guide. Perhaps someone with a rich, velvety voice and calm presence to accompany you to far-off places and times—even better, to take you there on a private jet—and to not only ask deep questions but arrange for experts to posit answers.

You may be in luck: *The Story of God* is a six-part documentary series scheduled to air weekly on the National Geographic cable channel beginning on April 3. Actor, producer, and *Story* host Morgan Freeman travels the globe to glimpse how some religions (and a bit of modern neuroscience) attempt to answer our big human questions. Is there life after death? How was the universe created? Will the world end, and how? Who is God? What is the root of evil and how has our idea of it changed over time? Are miracles real?



Morgan Freeman, host of *The Story of God*

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Beholden

There are bits of melodrama in the framing of Freeman's quest and in some of the dramatizations of historic events, but this is edutainment TV, not a graduate school seminar.

What holds it all together is Freeman. He is not just narrating, he is present on screen, curious, listening deeply, dropping the occasional personal aside. Each of the three previewed episodes starts with Freeman on home turf in Mississippi, musing on how he first encountered death as a child or first wondered during a preacher's sermon about

Maybe we will not be saved by beauty, but perhaps beauty gives us the will to *want to be saved*.

how creation really happened. He describes himself as "a lifelong student of religion" who hasn't "landed on any conclusions": The quintessential seeker, a man with no doctrinal horse in the race, just looking to learn.

The Story of God delivers some interesting information and conversations with more than 50 experts and religious leaders. But its most profound element might be how Freeman engages people with respect and curiosity, and listens. Just listens. In a time of rampant bloviating, this alone seems like a kind of religious experience.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC channel hosted a trip to Rome for journalists (including this writer) to see places and people that Freeman covered in *Story*. That ancient city is known for its god-haunted corners, and we poked into several, including a visit to a museum documenting the history of a Jewish community present in Rome since the second century B.C.E.; a modern mosque; a small, funky Hindu temple in a suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of the city; and of course Vatican City.

Like Freeman does in *Story*, we met with Monsignor Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of

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New & Noteworthy

Pianist
Hélène Grimaud



ELEMENTAL

Classical pianist Hélène Grimaud's live album *Water* is a musical and spiritual reflection on the life-sustaining, yet too-often limited, resource. It is a beautiful compilation of compositions that celebrate the power, beauty, and rhythm of water, with a hope that it encourages ecological awareness. Deutsche Grammophon

FOR ALL AGES

Ronald J. Sider and Ben Lowe dialogue in *The Future of Our Faith: An Intergenerational Conversation on Critical Issues Facing the Church*. Each chapter has sidebar reflections from other leaders, including Christena Cleveland, Gabriel Salguero, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Jenny Yang. Brazos Press

SALT AND LIGHT

Rap artist Lecrae documents his development as a musician and Christian, through personal journal entries and new text, in the book *Unashamed*. He tells of doubts, struggles, and the difficulty of bringing Christ with him to the music big leagues. Written with Jonathan Merritt. B&H Publishing Group

LIFE JOURNEY

Hold Nothing Back: Writings by Dorothy Day, edited by Patrick Jordan, is a new, abridged version of a previously published collection of Day's articles for the magazine *Commonweal*, ranging from when she was the single mother of a young girl to when she was in her 70s. Liturgical Press

(Let's just get this out of the way now: Yes, Freeman has played God in two feature films, *Bruce Almighty* and its sequel *Evan Almighty*. No, he is not reprising the role in *The Story of God*.)

Given the enormity of the task Freeman and the other producers set for themselves—wrestling with theological conundrums, including some perspective from ancient beliefs and each of the five major world religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism), shooting in 13 countries, and whittling all that footage down to six hours total for airing—they did admirable work. It's impossible to go deep or broad into a religion within those kinds of constraints, but the threads of history and theology presented, and the experts presenting them, are interesting and legitimate.

The Silicon Raj

A COUPLE years ago, when net neutrality (the principle that internet service providers must treat all websites equally) was threatened by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Facebook stood firmly in its defense. Google, Netflix, Amazon, Twitter, and other high-tech giants took the same stand. Companies that make their money providing content or mining data from web users need net neutrality in order to function.

This February, India's equivalent of the FCC, their Telecom Regulatory Authority, had to decide an important net neutrality test case there. A huge, U.S.-based multinational came into the Indian market offering an internet connection that limited users to the parent company's own site and a severely limited menu of other pre-selected sites. This company spent millions on an advertising campaign against the principle of net neutrality in India.

The well-meaning 21st century colonialist may come in a T-shirt and a hoodie instead of khakis and a pith helmet.

But finally Indian regulators stood firm and net neutrality was upheld.

The strange twist here is this: The U.S.-based Goliath fighting net neutrality in India was Facebook.

An obvious conclusion here would be that Facebook thinks net neutrality is only good for rich countries. Indians must be too poor, too ill-educated, maybe even too brown to handle the freedom and responsibility that comes with an open internet. That impression was confirmed when a member of Facebook's board of directors, venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, went on Twitter to proclaim: "Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people

for decades. Why stop now?"

That left the pretty clear implication that the Indians had been better off under British rule. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg stepped in to apologize, and his apology was undoubtedly sincere. But here's an even stranger twist to this story. The product that the Indian regulators rejected was actually a well-intentioned attempt

by Facebook to begin bringing the internet, or part of it anyhow, to some of the poorest people on earth.

The product is called Free Basics, and it is being offered in 37 low-income countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It allows people who own a smartphone to connect to Facebook and a limited menu

of information and education sites without accruing any data charges on their phone bills. True, it makes Facebook the portal to the web for the world's

huddled masses instead of, say, Google. After all, Zuckerberg really does believe that what's good for Facebook is good for humanity. But Free Basics also reflects Zuckerberg's view that the main thing holding the global poor back from the internet is data charges.

In a paper titled "Is Connectivity a Human Right?" Zuckerberg supports this point with the sole example of a U.S. iPhone user who may pay \$500 for a phone but then \$2,000 in data charges. However, according to Indian-American tech entrepreneur Vivek Wadhwa, writing at *TechCrunch*, "What



A billboard in Mumbai, India, promotes Facebook's Free Basics initiative.

Reuters

Zuckerberg and his U.S. team didn't understand was that in India ... 100MB of data—which is more than a Free Basics user will consume in a month—costs much less than a dollar."

Smart phones and tablets are also much cheaper in India than here, but that cost is still the average Indian's biggest obstacle to connectivity. And, as Wadhwa put it, "When the poor save up to buy these [devices], they want to be able to surf the web as Western users do ... they don't want to be limited to visiting the health and education sites that Facebook directs them to."

So what's the bottom line here? How about this: The well-meaning 21st century colonialist may come in a T-shirt and a hoodie instead of khakis and a pith helmet, and he may preach global connectivity instead of Christian civilization. But he still can't imagine his way into the lives of the poor majority, or begin to comprehend why they might see him as an exploiter instead of a savior. ■



Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.

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Social Sciences. Sorondo explained that the Catholic Church sees no conflict between science and faith. Scientists helped shape the environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'*, he noted, and Pope Francis has encouraged the academies to be involved in the fight against human trafficking and other issues.

On our visit to the Biblioteca Casanatense, a library founded in 1701, the room housing the oldest part of the collection was anchored by two enormous centuries-old globes, one beautifully painted with the entire known world at that time, the other with the known constellations. All that was *unknown* is apparent to our modern eyes, perhaps a cautionary tale for our data-drunk time (there be dragons we have not yet met). On a table, 11th and 15th century illuminated manuscripts—the gospels, a book of hours, a missal—were spread like the day's newspapers. Word without end, amen. One of the library's archivists swept her hands over them, her voice swelling with passion—"Here are the roots of all our [Western] culture." Words of worship and

In a time of rampant bloviating, just *listening* seems like a kind of religious experience.

searching, adorned with gold leaf and jewel-toned lettering, and the occasional marginal correction.

In Rome, such lovely fruits of piety were everywhere: Michelangelo's Pietà in St. Peter's Basilica. Intricate, embroidered brocade Torah covers in the Jewish Museum—stunning emblems of resistance by a community forced into a walled ghetto in 1555 and allowed only unskilled trades, such as rag dealing. The repeating geometric patterns and tree-like columns in the mosque. The tangerine and fuchsia riot of the homegrown Hindu compound. In *The Story of God*, the art of faith is not the focus, but it appears in a wider lens—ancient monuments and shrines, fire against a night sky, a body wrapped in saffron cloth being carried to a sacred river for cremation. Is hunger for beauty part of what unites us? Maybe we will



Charlie Chaplin as *The Great Dictator*.

MOCKING PRETENTIOUS POWER

EXTRAORDINARY British actor Mark Rylance has a noble theatrical reputation but has only recently found prominence in movies, most notably in the wonderful Steven Spielberg Cold War film **Bridge of Spies**, for which he recently won the best supporting actor Oscar. Speaking of Spielberg, Rylance made a beautiful point: "Unlike some of the leaders we're being presented with these days, he leads with such love that he's surrounded by masters in every craft." This gentle wisdom—that good leaders attract good teams—echoes the message of *Bridge of Spies*, which illuminates the possibility of talking to each other across boundaries of militancy, misunderstanding, and fear. It is an invitation to loving leadership, criticizing a mutually destructive strategy by practicing something better.

Amid the noise of "some of the leaders we're being presented with these days," I've been indulging in a little comfort-watching, asking Charlie Chaplin to help me discern a way through. Chaplin's brave, hilarious, and deeply moving film *The Great Dictator* does to authoritarianism what C.S. Lewis says the devil cannot tolerate: It mocks evil, revealing its pretensions. Chaplin's courage has rarely been matched. Today his mantle may be held by Sacha Baron Cohen, whose trilogy of pride-puncturing, diversity-affirming films, *Borat*, *Brüno*, and especially *The Dictator*, is brave enough to challenge prejudice when it's not safe to do so. These three are in the same tradition as Dr.

Strangelove, *In the Loop*, *Four Lions*, *Dave*, and the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, which make us laugh at the absurdity of political control, taking away some of its power.

If comic portrayals of bad leadership are comforting, serious cinematic explorations of bad leadership might help us learn how to avoid it. *Nixon*, *Downfall*, the *Godfather* trilogy, *Citizen Kane*, *The Apostle*, *Beasts of No Nation*, *The Act of Killing*, *Leviathan*, and *There Will Be Blood* all present warnings of what happens when leaders are self-interested, unaccountable to an emotionally mature community, and not mentored in tending to their inner lives.

Serious explorations of *good* leadership know that their protagonists are human beings rather than magic figures we couldn't possibly emulate. *Lincoln*; *Life Is Beautiful*; *Milk*; *Short Term 12*; *Calvary*; *Selma*; *Good Night, and Good Luck*; *Kundun*; *Schindler's List*; and *Babette's Feast* all present leadership as service to the common good, bringing out the best in others.

And then there are serious explorations of the need for leadership, such as *Do the Right Thing* and Michael Moore's recent **Where to Invade Next**. In honestly facing what's not working and what could help transform us, they lead with love. ■

Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and the founder of moviesandmeaning.com.

not be saved by beauty, but perhaps beauty gives us the will to *want* to be saved.

Freeman's co-executive producers, Lori McCreary and James Younger, note that they are focused on the commonalities among peoples and religions, saying that "we hope *The Story of God* will help open an interfaith dialogue about ideas and values that we all share, not that we disagree on." When asked if justice issues were part of this story, they said no. But of course the troubling issues of this world are in there nonetheless. (No matter how other-worldly a faith tries to be, its adherents are stuck in this one.)

Climate change is mentioned as a real and pressing danger. Freeman notes that the historic Jewish understanding of the messiah as an earthly ruler who rebuilds the Temple Mount and brings peace to the world is paradoxical, since rebuilding the Temple Mount would obliterate Muslim holy sites and likely spark even more bloodshed than is already happening in the Holy Land. Freeman interviews survivors of Katrina. He interviews Maajid Nawaz, who was once imprisoned as a recruiter for Islamic extremist groups; now Nawaz is a moderate working with Muslims who are on the path he left behind, encouraging them back to the true tenets of their faith. In other words there are multiple reminders in *The Story of God* of how, as Freeman says about the human fascination with apocalypse, "something about the drama of annihilation seems to grip us."

Even those of us who assert that our faith calls us to nonviolence will inevitably run up against the conflicts and contradictions inherent within our faith and between faiths. And find that in the name of God there are arguments worth having, wrongs to try to right.

But sometimes we might try the way of the seeker. (Sadly, in real life we must do this unaccompanied by Morgan Freeman's mesmerizing voice.) Could peace be found too in listening more, being changed by beauty, and allowing ourselves awe at the intricacy and endless mysteries of this story that we say we believe God is telling? ■

Julie Polter is a senior associate editor of Sojourners. She traveled to Rome in February as part of a media delegation sponsored by the National Geographic channel.

Reviewed by Andrew Wilkes

LEAVING PHARAOH

Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation, by Herbert Robinson Marbury. NYU Press.

HERBERT ROBINSON Marbury's *Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation* achieves the distinction of providing fresh insight in well-covered territory. Marbury, with imagination and impressive intellectual range, explores the uses of Exodus by African Americans in struggles for freedom, respect, and full inclusion into the democratic mechanisms of American political life.

For the past four decades, scholars in fields as disparate as African-American religious history, preaching, rhetoric, constructive theology, and American studies have noted a fundamental duality: White Christian immigrants perceived Britain as Pharaoh and America as the Promised Land; enslaved Africans, by contrast, saw America as a strange land in which white Christian immigrants were Pharaoh. Instead of covering this important though beaten path, Marbury employs an alternative strategy.

What's his take? Marbury's book acknowledges this rich history, specifically the first two generations of African-American biblical scholarship. Then he pivots quickly to define cultural studies as a foundational discipline anchoring his reading of the text. What this means is that Marbury unpacks the significance of scripture by assessing the canonical account as well as the life-world and aims of individual interpreters who employ what Hebrew Bible scholar Renita Weems calls reading strategies for the text. The arc of Marbury's analysis stretches from the antebellum era to the black power movement.

As one might speculate, pillars of cloud and fire are the controlling images of Marbury's subtle analysis. Biblically, by day a pillar of cloud led the children of Israel through the wilderness of Shur

to the Promised Land. By night a pillar of fire performed the same guiding function. Marbury transposes these metaphors into the register of social change and political

activity. In Marbury's key of collective action, clouds signify an indirect, reformist approach to advancing racial equity. As clouds blend in, more or less, with the surrounding sky, so "cloud" approaches to transformation proceed by inches and inconspicuous tactics. Episcopal priest Rev. Absalom Jones and path-breaking activist Frances Ellen Watkins

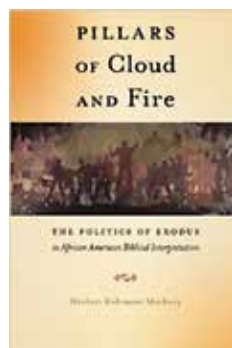
Harper function as exemplars in the "pillars of cloud" tradition.

Juxtaposed against the clouds, fire symbolizes frontal exposure of, and opposition to, the inequities of racism. David Walker—

the audacious author of the *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829)—and Rev. John Jasper of Richmond, Va., with his legendary "The Sun Do Move" sermon, represent the "pillars of fire" tradition.

Throughout the book Marbury interweaves what biblical scholar Terence Fretheim calls the world behind the text (historical reconstruction), the world of the text (various modes of scriptural exegesis), and the world before the text (cultural studies and rhetorical criticism). The implications are richly suggestive for congregational, academic, and activist audiences. For the first crowd, Marbury's hermeneutic of cultural studies paired with biblical studies offers an inventive way to contextualize Christian education curricula and arrange worship services for all demographics, especially people of color.

To scholars, Marbury accomplishes the rare feat of composing a well-researched monograph that exposes new dimensions of the Exodus narrative. The chapter on "making bitter water sweet" during Reconstruction and the beginning of the Jim Crow era, a period



Fire symbolizes frontal opposition to the inequities of racism.

many call the nadir of African-American history, is nuanced, tightly argued, and just plain enjoyable to read. Regarding activists, the take-home is plain: Hackneyed tropes can become new rallying points and galvanizing narratives in the hands of discerning organizers looking to influence local and political conversations regarding racism in America.

Reviewed by C. Christopher Smith

UNSETTLING OUR CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY

Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism, by Drew G.I. Hart.
Herald Press.

SINCE THE BEGINNING of the modern era almost 500 years ago, Western culture has been marked by a distinct aversion to history. Thus we have come to narrate our lives primarily through our stories as (seemingly) autonomous individuals, instead of through the social stories of the peoples and places to which we belong. One of the unfortunate consequences of this shift is that we often become blind to the socioeconomic narratives that have set the stage for our present lives.

One of these is white supremacy, which has shaped the geographical, educational, and economic systems of our land over many generations and played a formative role in the life of almost every American. In his excellent new book, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism*, Drew Hart turns our attention to this story and particularly to the ways it misshapes our Christian faithfulness. Hart begins the book with a description of how racialized our lives are. Historically, nonwhites were excluded from many important spaces in U.S. public life: schools, governmental positions, and even churches. Although few, if any, of these spaces today explicitly exclude nonwhites, our socioeconomic systems are rooted in these earlier eras and continue to promote a highly segregated way of life. "When we can be honest about how our entire society is deeply racialized," Hart says, "we will be ready to move forward."

Hart reminds us that race is not simply about the color of one's skin but also about power and the question of who gets to dictate

Pillars is one of the best books of its kind. In the words of college recommendations for students of promise, I commend it without reservation and with full confidence. ■

Andrew Wilkes is the principal of Wilkes Advocacy Group and an associate pastor at the Greater Allen AME Cathedral of New York.



the course that our society will follow. Early in the book, he spends a chapter exploring how our understanding of Jesus is often too white. We are inclined to imagine Jesus as an influencer, one who works in the upper echelons of our hierarchical society and who has the power to control the course of society. Hart emphasizes that this is not the Jesus that we find in the gospels, who aligned himself with the marginalized and who mostly rejected hierarchical society. "Where the old order dominated and violently lorded over others," Hart observes, "the kingdom of God arose from the bottom, margins, and cracks of society, freely inviting people to share in the peace and justice of God made available in the presence of Jesus."

As Willie Jennings, J. Kameron Carter, and many other theologians have reminded us, the American problem of race is largely theological in its origins. And it is precisely in its seeking to understand race in a way that is both theological and broadly accessible that *Trouble I've Seen* excels. Rather than offering us techniques for racial reconciliation, Hart challenges us to reconsider our conceptions of Jesus and how we are called to bear witness to the way of Jesus in the world. He upends the historical missionary vision that would convert Indigenous peoples first to Western culture and then to Christianity. Whiteness, he writes, "was created for the purpose of consolidating power and dominance over other people groups. Hence, as a social construction, whiteness is specifically about domination and violence." Furthermore, he argues, it is exactly this sort of domination and

violence that Jesus has rejected.

Hart's insistence that we stay focused on Jesus is refreshing. "We must reorient our lives to make the true Jesus the center of our lives." He writes, "The church must decentralize the white male figure's preeminence. ... Instead everyone is invited to sit around the table as equals. There is so much more we can learn about God in Christ Jesus, when we dialogue together on level terms."

This invitation to nonhierarchical dialogue is one we should prayerfully accept, seeking to create spaces in our churches and neighborhoods where we can learn to listen to and simply *be* with those who have been marginalized by the powers at work in Western culture. Perhaps as an impetus for such a conversation, we might read and discuss Hart's unsettling book, and in having our cultural Christianity unsettled by it, the Holy Spirit might just lead us into deeper expressions of faithfulness to the all-transforming way of Jesus. ■

C. Christopher Smith is editor of The Englewood Review of Books and co-author of Slow Church. His next book is Reading for the Common Good: How Books Help Our Churches and Neighborhoods Flourish (IVP Books, July 2016).

Reviewed by Olivia Whitener

DOES FAITH HELP OR HINDER PUBLIC HEALTH?

Beholden: Religion, Global Health, and Human Rights, by Susan R. Holman.
Oxford University Press.

AT 17, AS I SAT in a comprehensive health center in Namibia, a health care worker told my visiting religious group what the center *really* needed from outsiders to improve the care they offered. As a peer health educator at my high school, I entered the facility thinking I knew the universal cure for preventing HIV infection—education—and feeling sad that so many places in the world did not yet have access to the life-saving drugs because they could not afford them. I was naïve and incorrect on many fronts.

They had the drugs, the health worker

told us, and they had a well-developed education plan both for prevention and antiretroviral therapy. What they really needed right then was baby formula, to prevent HIV-positive mothers from passing the virus on to their newborns. So the next time we wanted to donate to the organization, he said, please send formula or the money to purchase some, instead of knitted newborn hats or volunteers ready to paint the facility walls.

Susan R. Holman, in her book *Beholden: Religion, Global Health, and Human Rights*, provides valuable narrative, analysis, and information that can similarly open the eyes of religious leaders about helpful, sustainable,

and respectful ways to approach health-related needs throughout the world. Unlike many global-health academics and activists, who simply dismiss religious efforts as destructive or limited, Holman asserts that religion must be incorporated into global-health initiatives “because faith matters to the large majority of people who are poor in this world.” Global-health initiatives cannot ignore the influence faith has on health, moral decision-making, and community structures.

Holman’s academic interests range from church history to nutrition, psychology to

“Faith matters to the large majority of people who are poor in this world.”

theology, and as a senior writer at the Global Health Education and Learning Incubator at Harvard University, she is a leading voice in calling attention to the “dazzling” potential

of a cross-disciplinary approach to global health. This approach revolves around people of religious faith learning about human rights history, and human rights activists acknowledging the important role faith plays in what communities identify as health.

In one example, she introduces the southern African concept of *ubuntu*, which “views human community in an intersubjective interconnectedness.” Because of this “beholdenness” to one another, “‘perfect health’ requires action at both individual and community levels,” which is quite different than the personalized attention of Western medicine.

In recognition of her work on this important book, in April Holman will be presented with the 2016 Grawemeyer Award in Religion by the University of Louisville and Louisville Seminary. Award director Shannon Craigo-Snell describes *Beholden* as “theology at ground level,” and I would absolutely agree. Though academic in nature, *Beholden* provides an outline of what Holman describes as a “faith-based perspective with a global health lens [that] calls for a broad-scope awareness of a diversity of stories from across disciplines and communities.”

And though her book does not provide a “how-to” for religious leaders, she does emphasize the most important step in reorienting a lens of “mission” to one of global concern: listening first. Because there is vast diversity in faith and culture, “there is no one ‘right’ way to talk about how religion relates to health.” Rather than universalizing, Holman concludes that “Whatever we do, we must begin by learning from and listening to others around us who have far more and more deeply nuanced wisdom.” By listening first and establishing relationships, we can truly partner to benefit the health of all. ■

Olivia Whitener is an editorial assistant for Sojourners.

EXCERPT

WHAT COMES AFTER DREAMS?

I NEVER EXPECTED to be here—unsettled, sometimes looking over my shoulder at so many precious and lost moments. I expected to always look forward, always be moving somewhere. I yearn for some fruition of my dreams: a time when racism and the earth are healed, when every child is loved to his or her full potential in every way, when my lover and best friend never doubts his beauty, when I am the person on this earth whom I long to be. I long for the certainty that my children possess—that they will save the frogs.

I did not choose these dreams of mine. They were given to me. I’m sure of it. The Spirit beckoned them, whispering: “Dee Dee, this is part of my vocation for you. Strive to make these dreams a reality. I will go with you.” And with that God-inspired passion at my back, I plunged ahead, doing my best to be faithful to what was asked. Truth be told, I expected to bring at least one dream to fruition—given all the heart that I was willing to pour in and all the need and the rightness of the causes.

It hasn’t worked like that. There have been no triumphs.

I sit with my friends, some of whom are four decades farther along this riddled path of life. They humor me. To them, I am so young. “Ah, I would love to be 50 again,” they smile at me from their older lives. Now they struggle with physical and mental diminishment and significant loss of independence. One cocks his head at me and says, “Ah, at 50, I started an entire new life!” I am too young to feel so daunted.

It’s not as if I have ever had illusions about changing the world, but I have thought that I might shift one corner of it. Here I am, emptied and less resilient than a few years ago, as if I stand on the verge of throwing in some cosmic towel. My peers resonate. Some shift we can’t name makes it hard to keep our spiritual grounding. There must be something more to this time in our lives than crossing our fingers as we watch the next few generations grow up lovely yet fragile behind us. ■

Excerpted from The Soulmaking Room, by Dee Dee Risher. Copyright 2016. Used by permission of Upper Room Books, bookstore.upperroom.org.

“Ah, at 50, I started an entire new life!”

Short Takes

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR...



Rev. J. Barrett Lee with worshippers at North Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, Mich.

North Presbyterian Church photo

J. Barrett Lee

Bio: Rev. J. Barrett Lee is pastor of North Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, Mich., whose mission is to “practice our ministry alongside people who live with mental illness.”

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1 Why is it important to talk about mental illness? The only time people want to talk about mental illness as a broad social issue is when a mass shooting occurs. It’s a huge problem because it perpetuates the myths of what mental illness is and how people with mental illness operate. People think, “What if some mentally ill person gets a gun and is going to shoot up a church or a school?” But the reality is that people who live with mental illness are actually 10 times more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of violence. I don’t know a single person in my church who even owns a gun.

2 How is North Presbyterian’s call to ministry unique? We decided that our ministry with people living with mental illness was not going to be a side project. It wasn’t going to be something we did in addition to our ministry. We felt God calling us to reorient the entire life of our congregation around making a space where all people can be treated as equal partners in Christ’s service. We started the Togetherness Group, a weekly social activities group

where the whole goal is to be together. We do lots of fun activities, whether that’s going out to lunch, going to the zoo, or just playing bingo on a rainy day. For a lot of folks, this is their one safe space each week when they can get out of the house, be treated like a human, embrace their own humanity, have a good time, and take some of the pressure off of daily living.

3 So what does Sunday worship look like? We recognize life is messy, so our worship is messy too. We have these large sections of our service we deliberately allow to get out of hand. The prayers of the people is the longest and most central part of our service. We have this time where people are able to name the stresses and the needs that they might be carrying with them into worship. When you have a community of people accustomed to not being listened to during their week in a room where they can name their needs—and then have people join them in prayer or thanksgiving—that is spiritually powerful.

4 How can other churches learn from North Church? One in five people live with mental illness in this country. Most people do a great job of hiding it because we’re taught that mental illness is something shameful. But when people hide a mental health illness, they can become sicker. But there is some real good news I think North can offer, and it’s that you don’t have to be alone. Because where brokenness abounds, grace abounds all the more.

5 What have you learned about ministry? It’s about ministry *with*, not ministry *to*. Every single person who comes to be part of our church is someone who has a need of some kind, but also has a gift and a calling. We have one member of our church who is profoundly disabled, both physically and cognitively, and at the end of the processional at the beginning of worship each Sunday, she shuffles to the front of the church with her walker and hands me a glass of water as service begins. And that is her ministry; that is her gift.

—Interview by Caroline Barnett

The Language of the Market?

MOST OF OUR HOLY DAYS have been colonized. The commercialization of Christmas and Easter is not quite evil, but it is certainly an obstacle to deepening one's faith.

Pentecost, however, we have all to ourselves. No one has figured out how to market it, perhaps because we Christians have so deemphasized it compared to our other great feasts. The Holy Spirit has sometimes been spoken of as the "shy" person of the Trinity. She's always pointing to Jesus. The Spirit is fine to let Jesus have all the attention.

But what a feast to have all to ourselves! One in which all nations are drawn to worship Zion's God. This flood of peoples is long promised in Israel's scripture and is now made good by Christ's Spirit.

North American culture continues to wrestle with racial politics. William Barber speaks of these days as a Third Reconstruction, after prior ones that arrived with Emancipation in the 1860s and the civil rights movements in the 1960s. This Third Reconstruction era includes #BlackLivesMatter, immigration, and struggles for citizenship wrestling against the demagogic, bloviating "No!" of politicians.

In all this, Pentecost says, "Yes." I'm tempted to say "quietly," but this yes is not quiet. It's a hurricane. It's followed by a sermon all listeners can hear in their own language. Even if the disciples can't speak all those languages, God can. God made all nations. God called Israel to be God's light and bride. And now, through Jesus, God is drawing all God's beloved peoples again. The church must show this in our life together.

And (don't forget this!) those from all nations have to die to ourselves and be raised in Christ's image. God is speaking, church! All we have to do is join in.



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[MAY 1]

Jesus Says, 'Come'

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 21:22 - 22:5; John 5:1-9

ONE WORD RESOUNDS through these readings: "Come!" Paul's vision is of a man from Macedonia saying, "Come ... help us" (Acts 16:9). Then we have the disabled man who has no one to help him, so that for 38 years he has watched others get well. To him

you anew. Come, be with us. And make all things right.

This is no quiescent word. As God's people pray "come," we don't do *nothing* in the meantime. We roll up our sleeves and work. Paul goes to Macedonia, preaches, and a powerful merchant woman, Lydia, becomes an early church leader. She says to Paul, "come," and he receives her hospitality, signaling the surprisingly faithful Jew-plus-Gentile communion of the church. In John's gospel, the disabled man's wrong answer in verse 7 to Jesus' question doesn't stop him from saying, "Come, be made whole." Ever since then, the church has built hospitals and prayed for healing, and has sometimes seen it. The Seer's stroll through the New Jerusalem in Revelation isn't as a tourist. It's as a pioneer who'll lead others to see as the Seer sees. Us included.

Elijah talks more trash to Baal's priests than any athlete on TV.

Jesus says, "Come"—and the man, strangely, is able to do so (John 5:1-9). The prayer that punctuates Revelation is not world-disregarding or destroying but is, simply, "Come," and the Seer sees the New Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven from God" (21:10).

We have a powerful word to say in prayer: Come. Your beautiful world has been without your presence too long. We need

[MAY 8]

Freedom Wins

Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

GOD IS ALWAYS taking the hash we creatures have made of God's world and birthing new life, right where we have sown death.

The story in Acts 16 starts with despair: slavery and demon possession. Liberation interrupts as a girl is healed, but then evil returns (as it is wont to do). Mob violence, trumped up charges, torture, jail. Grace interrupts again with an earthquake; barred doors fly open, O freedom! Evil returns again with a move toward suicide. Then grace triumphs: salvation for a household, baptism, a meal together, the end. The story of Acts 16 could be the whole story of God with us in Israel and Christ. God is always setting captives free. Their captors will always respond with horror and more violence. But freedom will always win, eventually.

Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 has been the inspiration behind the 20th century's ecumenical movement. Where I live, the United Church of Canada came into being from previous communions in hopes that our "being one" might encourage the world to believe. If God is indeed stitching the universe back together through the church, we should show some stitched-togetherness ourselves. It hasn't always worked. But it is Jesus' prayer, so it will.

[MAY 15]

Dizzying Languages

Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:24-35b; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17, 25-27

THE BEST THING churches can do on the feast of Pentecost is to have folks read scripture in many languages. The very disorientation in our ear is a reminder: God speaks all these languages. God created them. Loves their speakers. Speaks to them in their languages.

Missionaries have taken a beating in mainline churches over the last century. But the minute the church stops speaking many languages, it dies. Our faith is not ours alone. It's to be shared. Peacefully, in a way

that empowers the listener and disorients the speaker. Christianity, Andrew Walls teaches, is the sort of thing that renews itself at the edges and dies in the middle. The only way to get it back is to give it away.

Merchants know this. They still build towers to the heavens, speaking other languages so they can market in them. Multinational corporations bulldoze Indigenous landholdings and cultures to market hamburgers more readily. Missionaries toil away to learn difficult languages to write the Bible in them, worship in them, pray in them, because the Spirit rejoices in them, however few still speak them.

John 14 may be our most radioactive scripture. It sounds so exclusive (“No one comes to the Father except through me,” see 14:6). But somehow, Jesus says, the Spirit of God will dwell with us and make peace. God will do in *us* “greater things” than in Jesus?! How unbelievable. Lord, show us it is true.

[MAY 22]

Salvation's Love Triangle

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8;
Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

THE ANCIENT CHURCH fought over Proverbs 8:22: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work.” Does this show that Christ is a “creature” instead of one with God? But what we know is that this text isn’t about Christ at all. It’s about Wisdom. The ancients knew that God’s Wisdom, which calls to us from the streets (8:2-3), in which God delights since before creation, is God’s very nature. She is the sketch according to which God, the artist, makes all things. And she is the one according to whom God remakes all in Christ.

So yes, Wisdom is eternal. Divine. With us. Painfully refashioning us and all things.

The doctrine of the Trinity is about nothing less than salvation. The church sees Romans 5 as a description of who the Holy Spirit is: Love. The Spirit, Augustine taught, is the Love between the Father and the Son. Augustine says that any time “you see love, you see the Trinity ... the Lover, the Beloved, Love.” These are three and the Love between the Lover and Beloved is its own “thing.” It’s

God all over again. Note that any relationship you’re in is greater than the sum of its parts. That’s God, working between you, creating the Love that God eternally is.

God’s Wisdom, fleshed in Christ, is God. God’s Love, poured out in the Spirit, is God. And God is not a committee (thank God). Let us adore.

[MAY 29]

Power to Astonish

1 Kings 18:20-39; Psalm 96;
Galatians 1:1-12; Luke 7:1-10

MOST BIBLE proclamations are met in today’s world with a yawn. Non-Christians think they’ve heard it all before: Christians are closed-hearted and closed-minded bullies. Most Christians think they’ve heard it all before: Be good. God’s on our side. And pity the poor people who don’t know God.

The scriptures tell of a different reception of God’s good news: one of utter astonishment. In 1 Kings, Elijah drenches wood on an altar, then calls down fire—and it comes! Wet wood bursts into flames! Paul is astonished that the believers in Galatia have so quickly left their first love (verse 6). Jesus is astonished to see faith in a career Roman military officer. He has built the Jews a synagogue and understands that the authority he has as an officer over his troops is the same sort Jesus has over illness and death.

How do we recapture this kind of astonishment?

We could do worse than actually read the stories. Elijah talks more trash to Baal’s priests than any athlete on TV (for another sort of astonishment, look at verse 40). Jesus finds faith among those without it and faithlessness among those who claim it. Say that aloud in Bible study and wait for the astonishment that will follow. “Worship the Lord in holy splendor,” the psalm says. Our culture worships wealth and superficial beauty, but what’s *actually* beautiful is holiness and God and the poor neighbor. That’s not only beautiful. It’s the source of *all* beauty. Truly, what could be more astonishing? ■

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And a Little Child Shall Annoy Them

ONE OF OUR articles this month encourages us to more intentionally incorporate the lives and wonders of children into our worship, which is a great idea, because if all the kids are in the sanctuary you don't have to volunteer for child care.

But seriously, tapping the natural energy of the young would create a more holistic experience and open the door to a greater connection with the divine, assuming the divine has a short attention span and a constant runny nose and tends to giggle during silent reflection. Not to mention drawing pictures on the collection envelopes in the backs of pews. (If they don't want children's graffiti on those envelopes, they shouldn't put them right next to those little yellow pencils, which the child invariably drops and, with cat-like speed, goes after it before the parent can grab him. A short time later, pencil in hand, the young one looks around under the pew but sees no familiar legs or shoes. He is lost, not unlike the sheep the preacher is at that moment talking about, the difference being that the parent now pulling the child backward by his feet is less the Good Shepherd



watch, so little time, what with homework and all that).

Church was a place of safety and support, a time for the social outcasts of weekdays to finally feel appreciated and valued, particularly by the adults, who gladly drew us into the heart of the church, just as soon as they finished their cigarettes. (In those days, all have smoked and fallen short of the glory of God, although I think God cut you some slack if it was menthol.)

As a young child, I always enjoyed Sunday school, the crayon-based learning environment that taught me much about the Bible and its colorful characters, although most turned out to be brown. It was my crayon of choice since its universal unpopularity guaranteed it being the least-used in the box. Unless it was Noah's Ark Sunday. Then you'd better grab it quickly so your parents don't ask later why the animals were walking, two-by-two, into a purple boat.

ONCE A YEAR we had Children's Church, a Sunday morning worship planned and orchestrated entirely by the young people. In the sixth grade I was tapped as the song leader, and a seventh grader—much older and wiser—was chosen to preach. The fact he was the preacher's son had nothing to do with it, I'm sure, and I harbor no bitterness, nor will I even mention how much better I would have been in that role. I mean, the kid didn't even open with a joke!

Actually, I might have been the better choice, because that Sunday my song-leading skills became legendary, like Rasputin, only not in a good way.

Mimicking the adult song leader's technique I had long observed, I used my right hand to mark the rhythms, at first conducting in perfect time, but soon veering off from the tempo to create bold new strokes into the air above the altar. Holding the congregation spellbound, I became Jackson Pollock, conducting Philip Glass.

The people seemed to slowly enter a trance-like state, something an unscrupulous hypnotist might have taken advantage of before removing wallets and other valuables from a benumbed audience. (And in hindsight, Children's Church *could* have scored big for the offering plate that year.)

When the song ended and my arm finally came to rest at my side, the dumbstruck congregation sat motionless; you could have heard a pin drop. But it was a pencil, followed by the sound of a toddler being dragged backward along the floor, which stirred the worshippers back to the normal state of semi-consciousness.

The next year I received a special exemption from song leadership duties. Instead, they put me on child care. ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

Children should be listened to in church. (Like, there's a choice?)

of the New Testament and more the Vengeful God of the Old Testament who doesn't give a crap about sheep. But I digress.)

A child-centric church is something I experienced firsthand growing up in the warm embrace of the Southern Baptist church. For me, Sunday was the best day of the week. There was no school, so no gym class with humiliating taunts from peers questioning my athleticism, no condescending teachers refusing to give credit for my book report on *TV Guide* (so much to

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